

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #53 Fables of the Prime Directive](#)

Other eBooks in the Star Trek™: Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books:

#1: The Belly of the Beast by Dean Wesley Smith

#2: Fatal Error by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#3: Hard Crash by Christie Golden

#4: Interphase Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#5: Interphase Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#6: Cold Fusion by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#7: Invincible Book 1 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#8: Invincible Book 2 by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido

#9: The Riddled Post by Aaron Rosenberg

#10: Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#11: Ambush by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur

#12:Some Assembly Required by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley

#13:No Surrender by Jeff Mariotte

#14:Caveat Emptor by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins

#15:Past Life by Robert Greenberger

#16:Oaths by Glenn Hauman

#17:Foundations Book 1 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#18:Foundations Book 2 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#19:Foundations Book 3 by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#20:Enigma Ship by J. Steven York & Christina F. York

#21:War Stories Book 1 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#22:War Stories Book 2 by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#23:Wildfire Book 1 by David Mack

#24:Wildfire Book 2 by David Mack

#25:Home Fires by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#26:Age of Unreason by Scott Ciencin

#27:Balance of Nature by Heather Jarman

#28:Breakdowns by Keith R.A. DeCandido

#29:Aftermath by Christopher L. Bennett

#30:Ishtar Rising Book 1 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#31:Ishtar Rising Book 2 by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels

#32:Buying Time by Robert Greenberger

#33:Collective Hindsight Book 1 by Aaron Rosenberg

#34:Collective Hindsight Book 2 by Aaron Rosenberg

#35:The Demon Book 1 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

#36:The Demon Book 2 by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills

#37:Ring Around the Sky by Allyn Gibson

#38:Orphans by Kevin Killiany

#39:Grand Designs by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#40:Failsafe by David Mack

#41:Bitter Medicine by Dave Galanter

#42:Sargasso Sector by Paul Kupperberg

#43:Paradise Interrupted by John S. Drew

#44:Where Time Stands Still by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

#45:The Art of the Deal by Glenn Greenberg

#46:Spin by J. Steven York & Christina F. York

#47:Creative Couplings Book 1 by Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg

#48:Creative Couplings Book 2 by Glenn Hauman & Aaron Rosenberg

#49:Small World by David Mack

#50:Malefactorum by Terri Osborne

#51:Lost Time by Ilsa J. Bick

#52:Identity Crisis by John J. Ordovery

COMING SOON:

#53:Fables of the Prime Directive by Cory Rushton

#54:Security by Keith R.A. DeCandido



IDENTITY CRISIS

John J. Ordovery



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

An Original Publication of POCKET BOOKS



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY
10020

Copyright © 2005 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.



STAR TREK is a Registered Trademark of
Paramount Pictures.

This book is published by Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc., under exclusive license from Paramount Pictures.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

ISBN: 0-7434-9684-1

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition May 2005

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Visit us on the World Wide Web:

<http://www.SimonSays.com/st>

<http://www.startrek.com>

Chapter

1

Commander Sonya Guadalupe Gomez was glad her shore leave had come to its inevitable end. It wasn't that she hadn't had a good time on Recreational Station Hidalgo, it was that she had had almost too good a time. Her body was sore from dancing and her head a bit achy from imbibing liquids that were definitely not made with synthanol. As she threw her belongings into a small knapsack in preparation for the *Vinci*'s arrival that afternoon, she glanced over at the bed in her small tourist quarters. She had slept alone the entire week, but not for lack of the opportunity to do otherwise.

She had spent much of her shore leave with Tobias Shelt, a dashing, live-by-his-wits trader who had made showing her a good time his own personal mission over the last seven days. Together they had taken in all that Hidalgo had to offer, which wasn't all that much compared to a modern, sophisticated pleasure center. Gomez had chosen Hidalgo over someplace like Risa for two reasons: first, her parents had met on the station a few decades back and kept nagging her to go there, and second, the station had been preserved in pretty much the same condition as it had been when her parents had been there, and it had been quaint and old-fashioned even back then.

That meant food slots rather than replicators, that meant com units on the walls rather than a combat-grade communications link, that meant entertainment that was live rather than holographic, and most important, it meant a break from the cutting-edge technology Gomez faced every day as an engineer assigned to an S.C.E. ship.

Gomez had met Tobias Shelt her first evening on the station when she was moping over the fact that her original plan called for her to be sharing this vacation with Wayne "Pappy" Omthon. She had intended to spend her next leave with the owner of the freighter *Vulpecula* ever since they spoke shortly before Captain Gold's granddaughter's wedding on Earth. Unfortunately, the *Vulpecula*'s last cargo damaged the ship and Wayne was currently on Lissep engaged in a massive legal and mechanical hassle to get his ship fixed and get the client who did the damage to pay for it.

Of course, she didn't find this out until she had already arrived at Hidalgo and found a harried but very apologetic recorded message from Wayne explaining the problem.

Things looked up immediately when she met Tobias. He was polite, gentlemanly, and not at all insistent on the bedroom being a part of how they spent their time together. An old-fashioned guy to go with an old-fashioned station. He was attractive, interesting, made her laugh, and was clearly waiting for some sign from her before he took the relationship further than dinner and dancing. Why, Sonya thought, didn't I give him that sign, or just drag him back to my cabin? Ten years ago I would have. Even five. Even two.

Her packing done, Gomez double-checked around the cabin to make certain she hadn't left anything behind, wondering while she did so if all the grieving and growing she had done since the death of Kieran Duffy had forced her to leave so much of herself behind that she wasn't even the same person anymore. She'd been having those thoughts ever since their odd adventure with parallel universes on Deep Space 9 and she briefly encountered an alternate Kieran.

It made it damn near impossible to know what to do with poor Tobias.

A loud chirping suddenly sounded, breaking her reverie and doing nothing to reduce the ache in her head. Gomez recognized the archaic beep as the sound of the wall-mounted communicator. She walked over to it and flipped the On switch. The burst of static that came out turned the minor throbbing in her temples into a full-blown headache.

The static died down for a moment and a soft, officious voice confirmed her identity, then asked if she would hold on for a moment. Static filled the room again, making Gomez wonder if she had time before the *Vinci* arrived to stop by the medical suite for a headache cure.

"Commander Gomez," a strong, feminine voice said, "I'm Director Jerifer of Recreation Station Hidalgo." There was no static, but a sudden silence spoke to Gomez of a communications malfunction. Then there was static again, and then Jerifer was back on, her words barely audible. "The station has been experiencing a series of unexplained malfunctions, including in communications."

Gomez flipped the return switch. "I hadn't noticed," she said. The communicator went dead again. She waited, and Jerifer's voice came back on. "Could you come up to control and take a look at our communications array? You're S.C.E., right?"

Gomez sighed. The *Vinci* was due to pick her up in a few hours anyway, so getting back into harness a little ahead of time wasn't all that much of a problem, and she would rather work than think right now anyway. "Sure!" she said loudly, hoping Jerifer could hear her.

"What?" Jerifer said.

"Sure!" Gomez repeated loudly. "I'll bring my kit."

"Thank y. . . ." Jerifer's voice began, but was drowned out by static. Gomez turned the communicator off and headed for the door, her knapsack on her shoulder. She punched the antique door switch, and the door opened—then, as she tried to walk through it, closed again. Another push of the switch, the door opened and closed very quickly, then opened partway, then closed, then finally opened and stayed that way.

Well, isn't this lovely, Gomez thought. Her head pounded.

* * *

It took longer than Gomez had anticipated to reach the control room. The trip there had been more than

a little stressful on a couple of levels. The lighting in the corridors had kept switching between blinding brightness and total darkness, turning the corridors into surreal strobe-lit tunnels that made it more than a little difficult to find the turbolift; and when Gomez had finally found it, the voice commands were nonfunctional, as was the wall communicator. She had been about to step out and ask someone where the control room was when Tobias Shelt stepped in.

“Hi,” he said to her, and flashed her a wide happy smile. “I was just looking for you. Today’s your last day, right?” Gomez saw his face fall as he picked up that she had her knapsack with her. “Sonya,” he said in a sad, scolding tone, “you weren’t leaving without saying good-bye?”

Gomez had hoped to do just that. Better, she had thought, to just sneak away.

“Uh, no,” Gomez said, sounding unconvincing even to herself, “I’m headed to the control room; they asked me to take a look at what’s causing the malfunctions.”

“Place is just old,” Shelt said. “Nothing a few upgrades can’t take care of.”

“I hope you’re right.” Gomez smiled up at him without meaning to. “But for now, I can’t even get there. I don’t know what level it’s on, and the lift has gone deaf. Won’t take voice commands.” She kicked the side of the lift a little harder than she had intended to.

“Please choose a destination,” the elevator said suddenly.

“Control Center,” Shelt said quickly, and the turbolift started upward, although its motion was far from smooth. “That was easy,” he said. “If the rest of the problem is that simple, you’ll still have time for a farewell breakfast.”

“These things are rarely as simple as they seem on the surface,” Gomez said, hoping that this wasn’t the one time they were. With any luck a few complications would eat up the rest of the time before the *Vinci* arrived and she’d be able to make the clean getaway she’d planned in the first place.

“Well, look,” Shelt said reasonably, “if there’s time, there’s time. If not, we had a great week, didn’t we?”

“Uh, yes, we did,” Gomez said. Shelt tilted his head like he was expecting a good-bye kiss, but at that moment, the turbolift stopped, the door opened, and there were five or six people in the corridor outside.

“If you have time,” he said to her as she stepped out. “I’ll be around. . . .”

“Right,” Gomez said over her shoulder. There was an actual physical sign on the wall outside the turbolift door with an arrow that pointed the way to the control center. Some old-fashioned things were extremely practical. By the time she reached the control center, the strobing in the corridors had slacked off to a slight flickering that still pulled painfully at the corners of her eyes.

Chapter 2

The control center door was heavy and thick, Gomez noted as it slid open. The precautionary radiation shielding was as out of date as the rest of the station, ten times as bulky as modern photoclastic materials.

The rest of the center was of the same period. Gomez hadn't seen a room like this anywhere outside of images in her history of engineering class. It was overstuffed with consoles whose lights, switches, buttons, and dials played an electronic symphony of unfamiliar clicks, buzzes, and pops. The place doesn't lack for spit and polish, Gomez thought. The systems are old but I'd bet they're in great shape.

Above the consoles were old flat-panel displays, although the status readouts they showed were in modern style. The thing Gomez found the strangest—and the most old-fashioned—was that the visual readouts were above her head rather than being in essentially the same location on a unitary touch-screen interface. The control center also contained three Hidalgo Station engineers, who were, it seemed, frantically tracking down and resolving all the malfunctions as quickly as possible.

“Hey, guys,” Gomez said. “Any idea what’s causing this?”

“Haven’t had...” one of them said, as he threw switches that clicked and checked dials that whirred.

“A chance...” another picked up, sliding a squeaking chair back and forth between a console on one side of the room and a console on the other, spinning around as he went.

“To look into it.” The third one finished as he slid down to the floor and began pulling open a creaking access panel.

“It’s all we can do...” It was back to the first one, who was now on the other side of the room.

“To stay ahead...” the second, from under a control panel.

“Of the breakdowns.” The third, now on his feet, reading quickly through a readout screen.

“Make sure....”

“No one....”

“Runs out of air...”

“Or anything else bad....”

“Happens.”

Gomez nodded, following the rapid interchange easily enough and pleased that it seemed the team here knew what they were doing. It was just that they were shorthanded in this crisis. Fair enough. “Okay, you guys keep doing what you’re doing, I’ll start looking for the top-level problem.”

The three of them acknowledged her plan with nods as they continued to rush around the room responding to various lights and alarms.

Gomez sat down at the only free console and took a deep breath. As she familiarized herself with the system she noted that there were sections that were slightly more modern than the rest of the setup. They were still decades old, but looked recently installed. There were things Gomez had to know, so she grabbed the sliding chair before the engineer could slide away and spun him to face her. “Anything new go in before this all happened?”

“A couple of weeks ago we put in a new interswitcher, a new power gauge, and a new memory unit.”

The engineer rolled his eyes. “The crap was no more than twenty years old, untested, unreliable, and buggy. What could we do? They don’t make the good stuff anymore. Bet that’s where the problem is.”

As she released him to continue his frantic tour around the room, Gomez smiled at the notion of twenty-year-old equipment being called new. She understood, though, what he was getting at. If safety and unbroken functionality was your primary goal, then a tried-and-true system was often better than a new one, because over the years, all the bugs get worked out, all the patches on the patches on the patches got integrated, and the system was finally made near one-hundred-percent reliable. Problem was that usually happened long after new, improved systems came online, and you wound up back at where you started ironing out problems. Just as well that’s how it works, Gomez thought. It keeps us engineers in business.

The room suddenly got quiet, almost ominously so. The alarm beeps and squawks faded out. The lighting in the room was stable. Gomez scanned the status lights, which were carefully labeled by hand as to whether they reported on shields, life-support, or other station systems. They were all showing green.

“Looks like you got it,” she said to the three.

“Won’t last,” One of them said.

“It’s not stable,” another said.

“You have any idea what’s causing it yet?” the last one asked.

“Come on, guys.” Gomez’s eyes ran over the switches again. “Give me a minute or two.” She stood up and checked the more familiar readouts on the overhead display. There were fluctuations in several major systems, too many to be accounted for by random malfunctions. Sabotage? Gomez couldn’t imagine that anyone would think of Hidalgo as worth the effort. So it had to be something higher, something at a control level. . . .

“Maybe it’s a synchronistic leveling problem?” one of the station engineers said.

“Or a failed N-space conformation in the hyper-bridges?”

“No, more likely a bug in the negotiation buffers. . . .”

“A pattern breakdown in the—”

“Stop!” Gomez heard herself say, then instantly regretted it. These weren’t Starfleet engineers under her command, they were civilians who most likely knew this equipment better than she did. But with this headache she wasn’t going to be able to work this problem while trapped in a hailstorm of out-of-date techspeak.

The engineers stopped talking and looked quizzically at her. They also looked a bit disappointed. Oh, God, Gomez thought, they saw this as their chance to show off for an S.C.E. officer and I just slammed them. Great. “Look,” she said, “I’m sorry, it’s just that I couldn’t hear myself think. It’s going to take all of us to solve this, and you know this stuff much better than I do.”

“So,” one of them began, the oldest of them, and the other two stayed silent, quietly accepting him as spokesman, “what do you want us to do?”

Gomez thought about it for a minute. There had to be something that sounded good but got them out of her hair. She pulled up the specs on the station routing conduits. “I think we need hands-on inspections of the data interfaces at these three nodes.” She pointed on the display. “I think they might be futzing out on us and causing feedback throughout the system.”

The oldest of the engineers—still a young man from Gomez’s point of view—looked thoughtfully at the station schematic. “That...” he began, and Gomez held her breath, worried he’d seen through the make-work she’d just given his team, “...just might be it.” He turned to the two younger men and nodded. “Okay, guys, let’s split ’em up north, south, and east.” He turned to Gomez. “We’ll call in when we get there, call in again when we have status for you. That work?”

Gomez nodded, still uncertain whether he’d seen through what she was doing and was just playing along, or if she had randomly put her finger on something that might actually impact the problem. In any case, she would have a chance to work in peace. “Thank you,” she called after them as they opened the large blast door, left the control center, and closed the door behind them.

That left Gomez alone in the relative quiet with only the faint buzzing of the equipment filling the room, and that gave her a chance to think. They’d said that they just put in a new—relatively new—interswitcher, a new power gauge, and a new—what was it?—memory unit. Newly added equipment was always the first place to look for a malfunction—that was Engineering 101 stuff. So think this through. An interswitcher was just a glorified dimmer switch—it couldn’t cause this much trouble. Nor could a power gauge, especially one that was right in front of her and clearly working perfectly. So first things first, check out the memory unit.

A quick diagnostic showed the memory unit filled to capacity. That’s odd, Gomez thought, this station doesn’t have enough data traffic to fill up any memory unit, even one this old-fashioned. She checked the specs on the unit. It was a fourth-generation version of the ones now in general use throughout the galaxy, although those were on their fiftieth or sixtieth generation by now. Still, it should have had plenty of storage.

So, Gomez thought, let’s see what’s filling it up. A second-level diagnostic pulled up a repeated pattern, and Gomez downloaded one unit of the pattern and then uploaded it to the overhead display screen.

To her surprise it was pure text that read:

To Whomever This Reaches:

I, and my planet, are in desperate need of your help. I am the Finance Minister for Sigma V, a small world in Sector 861, on the far edge of the galaxy. The peaceful, freedom-loving, and democratic republic for which I work is under siege by a horrible military power who will bring ruin upon us and upon any other planet that falls within their reach.

As Finance Minister, I am in a position to access the wealth of our entire planet. I am contacting you in hopes of gaining your assistance in moving this gigantic sum, an amount equal to almost five billion bars of gold-pressed latinum, off our world before it falls into the control of the opposing forces, who will use it to oppress my people and to export their terror to the rest of the galaxy.

I realize the difficulty of what I am about to ask, but I am desperate. I need access to any and all latinum accounts you may have, so I can transfer my world’s funds there. I recognize that there may be substantial risk to your person involved, so in recompense I am offering to pay you ten percent of the entire planetary wealth of Sigma V, which amounts to just under five-hundred-million bars of

gold-pressed latinum.

Before you accept this offer, please think over the risk carefully. If you have the courage to accept, simply reply to this communication with all your latinum account information and wait for the funds to be transferred to you. I will arrange to recover the bulk of the monies that rightly belong to the people of Sigma V at a later time. Any interest that accrues over that time will belong to you as well.

Please, help me and my people.

Ardack Sprachnee, Finance Minister, Sigma V.

Gomez laughed when she read it. In form and function it was clearly a piece of tribblecom, a letter sent out with the intent of reaching the maximum number of communication links in the hope that someone somewhere would be foolish enough to fall for the obvious scam. The letter contained subprogramming that enabled it to eat up as much memory space as the target system had, reproduce itself to the extent of the “food supply,” and then broadcast itself to every connected user on the system—as well as to every communications address the system contained. Uncontrolled, a tribblecom could clog up an entire computer system—which was what seemed to be happening here.

Gomez ran a few tests to confirm her theory, and was relieved to see her first thought was right—the recently installed memory unit was just advanced enough to be accessible to a modern tribblecom, but not advanced enough to have built-in safeguards against them.

A few buttons punched brought up the hidden sub-code behind the letter, and it was the work of only a few moments for Gomez to decide which of a dozen glommer programs would be most effective. Named for a tribble predator the Klingons had genetically engineered way back when, a properly targeted glommer would turn the tables on the tribblecom, tracking it to wherever in the system it tried to hide, devouring it, and leaving behind clear and usable memory.

By the time the three station engineers called in with their status data, Gomez had a working glommer written—it had been a little tricky, the tribblecom was a little different from others she’d dealt with. She told the three of them she’d found the problem and to come on back. It took a few runs through a compression compiler to get the glommer to run on a memory system this old and so cramped for space, but it was working. Gomez got up and recovered her knapsack from where she’d dropped in on the floor. As the tribblecom was wiped from memory, she could see system lights going from red to amber to green as station control came fully back online.

That’s that then, Gomez thought, and headed for the door and pushed the open switch. The door, she was glad to see, swung open quickly and smoothly. She was about to step through and head for the departure lounge when the communications system beeped behind her, and her headache, which had been forgotten in the heat of problem-solving concentration, came back in full force. With a sigh she stepped back into the room and answered it.

“May I ask with whom I am speaking?” a mechanical sounding voice said.

“Commander Sonya Gomez,” she replied. “S.C.E. What can I do for you?”

“Could you hold a moment, please?” the voice said, and Gomez waited, patiently at first, then impatiently. When it seemed there was no one there, Gomez cut the connection and headed out again. At that moment the door to the control center slid smoothly and firmly shut, with an ominous sense of finality. Gomez hit the open switch again but nothing happened.

Gomez sighed. Maybe she hadn't cleared the system after all. She went back to the board, but found it nonresponsive. As far as the computer was concerned, she might not have been pushing the buttons at all. She tried to resolve it on her own for a few moments, then bit the bullet and flipped the communications switch back on. I'm not above asking for help when I need it, Gomez thought, but it'd be embarrassing to have to ask the guys I threw out of here to come to my rescue.

The communications switch was dead.

No reason to panic, Gomez thought. They'll realize their control center is cut off pretty quickly, and someone will come get me out of here. One of the overhead display screens popped into life just as she was moving toward the communications console. Gomez turned to look up at what she expected to be the face of the oldest of the three engineers, or that of Director Jerifer. Instead, the face of Captain Gold stared out at her. And he was not at all happy.

"Gomez," he said, his slightly careworn face showing a combination of anger, concern, and curiosity, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Gomez was taken aback. Yes, it seemed she hadn't fixed the computer problems on Hidalgo Station as quickly and easily as she had hoped, but the captain's reaction was way out of proportion to the situation. She wasn't even late getting back to the da Vinci, although she might be if it took more than a few hours to get out of the control center.

"Well, sir," Gomez started, but Gold continued.

"That's crazy talk. You're putting the lives of hundreds of people at risk." Gold's voice softened. "Gomez, is something wrong? You've never expressed a single political thought in all the time you've been on the da Vinci—and now this?"

"Sir," Gomez began again, "in my defense, and with all due respect, what in God's name are you talking about?"

Gold sighed and paused, but not as if he'd heard her. To Gomez it looked as if he was listening to someone offscreen. Then he continued.

"Gomez, it's very hard for this old man to hear you speak like that. For your sake, I hope it turns out you're under some kind of mind control, or possessed by an alien life form, or some other equally valid excuse. For now, all I can do is ask you to restore the station's life support to full strength. Please, those are real people you're dealing with, not abstract political concepts."

There was another pause. Gomez quickly checked the readouts—station life support had been cut to ninety percent.

"Agreed, then." The sadness in Gold's voice was palpable. "I'll make sure Starfleet and the Federation take your demands seriously. We'll speak again in two hours."

"Sir!" Gomez shouted. "Don't—" But then he was gone. She tried the door switch again, tried the communications switch four or five times, and ended by slamming her fist down on the computer console. Something bad was happening, and she was obviously involved, and she was very, very interested in finding out what the hell was going on.

Chapter

3

On the bridge of the *Vinci*, Captain David Gold sat with his back straight despite his exhaustion, wondering what the hell was going on. He asked Ensign Haznedl at ops to replay the conversation he'd just had with Gomez, beginning with the sector-wide onscreen announcement that Gomez had made.

"Attention Federation government," Gomez had said, reading from a padd she held up in front of her, "this is Commander Sonya Gomez, formerly of Starfleet. I can no longer sit by and let the Federation continue to compromise its ideals and its principles by holding thousands of people in prison for no crime greater than differing with the Federation on issues of policy.

"I have been forced to take drastic steps to secure the release of these prisoners of conscience. The computer system of *Hidalgo Station* is under my control, and I have just reduced the life-support settings by ten percent. I will reduce life support by another ten percent every two hours that the prisoners on the attached list remain incarcerated."

"Gomez," he had said, fighting to keep his voice steady, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

There had been a pause as Gomez's image on the viewscreen looked up at him sadly. "Captain Gold," she had said, "I'm sorry that you are involved in this. I am only doing what has to be done. Someone has to take a stand."

"That's crazy talk. You're putting the lives of hundreds of people at risk. Gomez, is something wrong? You've never expressed a single political thought in all the time you've been on the *Vinci*—and now this?"

Gomez's image looked at him sadly. "The Federation is drunk with power, Captain. It must be brought to its knees. This is only the first stage of a Federation-wide rebellion that will wrest the reins of power from those who oppress the masses."

"Gomez," Gold had said, choosing his words very carefully, "it's very hard for this old man to hear you speak like that. For your sake, I hope it turns out you're under some kind of mind control, or possessed by an alien life-form, or some other equally valid excuse. For now, all I can do is ask you to restore the station's life support to full strength. Please, those are real people you're dealing with, not abstract political concepts."

"That's something the Federation should have thought of years ago. Two hours, Captain, or I lower the life support. I'll speak with you then. Agreed?"

"Agreed, then," Gold said wearily. "I'll make sure Starfleet and the Federation take your demands seriously. We'll speak again in two hours."

This is the last thing we needed, Gold thought. The crew was exhausted, stretched almost beyond endurance by the just-completed mission to *Artemis IX*. The mission to reverse-engineer million-year-old alien crystal technology had seemed tedious but manageable at first. Yes, the airless environment and high gravity of the planet meant working in bulky, specially modified EVA suits, but at least no one had been shooting at them—until the *Androssi* showed up to take the technology for themselves.

Gold was already short four people, with Lense at her medical conference, Gomez on leave, and the replacements for Caitano and Deverick not having reported yet. Still, he had had to deploy almost the entire crew, sending Corsi and her remaining security people with phaser rifles to defend the engineers as they worked under fire to evaluate and understand the long-abandoned technology, which had turned out to be pretty nasty and a serious threat to the inhabited planets of the Artemis system.

In the end the job was done, and no lives were lost among his crew—for which Gold was grateful; they had only just returned from Deverick's and Caitano's funerals—but at the moment his people were all but burned out, Gold included. Since they were headed for the Hidalgo Station anyway to pick up Commander Gomez, Gold had secretly scheduled shore leave on the station for as much of the crew as could be spared. Now not only was that out of the question, but Gomez—whose expertise had been sorely missed on Artemis IX, Tev's protestations to the contrary—was at the center of a new, improved crisis.

"Do you think that's possible, sir?"

The voice of Lieutenant Tony Shabalala from the tactical station behind Gold's command chair pulled Gold back to the present.

"What's possible, Shabalala?" Gold asked.

"That Commander Gomez is under mind control, or that she's been possessed by some kind of alien entity?"

"I certainly hope so," Gold said. "It's a strange galaxy. That kind of thing seems to happen a lot—it happened to me about fifteen years back, for that matter."

"Love to hear that story someday, sir."

"Sir," Haznedl said, "I'm getting an urgent communication from Starfleet Command."

"Well, I wonder what they could possibly want?" Gold said to the air in front of him.

* * *

The communication from Admiral Pishke had been surprisingly brief, Gold thought, considering the seriousness of the topic. Since Gomez was his officer, and all efforts at reaching anyone trapped on the station by the shields had been blocked by a static field, he was being given point on resolving the situation. In the meantime, Starfleet was reviewing the lengthy list of prisoners Gomez was demanding be released—it turned out there were thousands of them from hundreds of worlds within and without the Federation. The admiral had promised to get back to Gold with the results of the review just under the two-hour deadline.

The question was what to do now. Gold's answer was to do whatever they could with the materials at hand, just like always. It was just barely possible that Gomez had harbored these feelings for days, months, or years and that Duffy's death had pushed her over the edge. Even as Gold thought it, though, he all but dismissed it. For one thing, Duffy's death was months ago, and she'd shown no sign of cracking. He also didn't believe this was something she would do, even if she did break down. As captain, though, he had to check out all options.

Another possibility was that something happened to Gomez when they dealt with that quantum foam

mess in the Bajoran system. But that doesn't track, either—we were all exposed to that, and we've had the added stress of Artemis IX on top of that, and none of us are demanding that political prisoners be released.

Gold spun his chair around to face the aft stations. Soloman, the Bynar computer specialist, was working there by himself, as much of the rest of the crew was on mandatory downtime to recoup after the last week's efforts. The Bynar seemed to feel Gold's eyes on the back of his neck, or perhaps had heard the captain's chair swivel in his direction, because he turned around and looked at the captain with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Soloman," Gold said, "I hate to ask you this, but needs must. Could you break the security profiles on Commander Gomez's personal logs? We need to see just how much of an aberration this is, if there's anything in her personal writings that would have predicted her behavior."

Gold sometimes found the expressions on his Bynar officer's face hard to read, but Soloman did seem a little uncomfortable at being ordered to invade Gomez's privacy. I'm not happy about it myself, he thought, but under the circumstances, I really have no choice.

"When you pull the logs up," he said to Soloman, "wake up Abramowitz and ask her to go over them."

Carol Abramowitz's official assignment to the S.C.E. was cultural specialist, but she also had the most psychology training of anyone on board, with Lense unavailable. She was the best choice for a quick on-site analysis of whatever was in Gomez's journals—and while Gold could just have them sent to Starfleet for expert analysis, if it turned out that the journals had nothing to do with the situation, which was what Gold thought was most likely, he wanted Gomez's intimate thoughts to be kept as private as possible.

Chapter 4

Gomez was flat on her back, legs in the air, her body buried up to its intimate parts in the Hidalgo Station communications console. Working on archaic technology without a manual was just the kind of challenge she normally got a charge out of, but people's lives were at stake and this was no time for the joys of tinkering. Rerouting the com circuitry past the systems block had taken almost the entire two hours before Captain Gold had said he'd call back, but she'd done it—she hoped.

Gomez slid out from under the console, scraping her back painfully on a metal edge as she did so. She stood up too quickly, waited for the dizziness to pass, and then flipped on the communications switch. "Commander Gomez to Director Jerifer," she said. Nothing. The light on the unit that showed its status was green, meaning her voice should be getting out—unless, as sometimes happened, all she'd done was reroute power to the status light. "Commander Gomez to anyone who can hear me," she said again, resisting the temptation to shout into the com unit. There was no reply. She tried again, and the communicator sprang to life.

All she had managed to do was open an incoming channel from the interior communications links, so she could hear the station crew talk about breaking out emergency equipment and ways to break into the computer control center. Meanwhile, Director Jerifer and Tobias Shelt kept trying to reach her. None of that was helping her concentration, so she tried to cut it off—and failed. Instead, it got louder, which didn't help much.

From the reports and from the gauges in the control room, Gomez saw that station shields were on full, preventing anyone from leaving, that the power systems were still fluctuating like they had on her way up to the control room, and that people were starting to feel the negative effects of the truncated life support. Director Jerifer was doing an excellent job keeping the panic down and the engineers she had gotten rid of were jerry-rigging spot bypasses for the power lines and reactivating mothballed air regenerators with S.C.E.-level efficiency. Even so, conditions on the station were getting harsh, if not yet deadly. Gomez noticed she was breathing more quickly in the thinning air and that it was starting to get cold in the control room.

Just as Gomez was regretting not having even one of the station engineers inside with her to help, the overhead display popped into life all by itself. Aha. Maybe I accidentally rerouted the audio circuits through visual? As long as she could get a message out, she'd count that as a success. She waited while an image formed on the display. As surprised as she had been to see the image of an angry Captain Gold the last time she'd checked the screen, Gomez was far more surprised to see her own image up there—not as she was, tired, cold, and pissed off, but instead sitting calmly at the communications console.

Then the image of her on the screen began speaking in her voice, not to her, but to Starfleet in general and Captain Gold in particular. It was reminding the captain that his deadline for releasing the political prisoners had run out, and that the tyranny of the state over the common people had to be reversed, and that left her no choice but to reduce station life support another ten percent. Then the display dissolved into a split screen, and Gold's image faded in.

Gomez's blood boiled with frustration as she watched Captain Gold trying to talk "her" out of this rash action that endangered people's lives. Gold went on to ask for more time, which the Gomez simulacrum denied. How could he really think that's me? Gomez thought. I'm nothing like that. The result of the conversation was that station life support began falling another ten percent, and as the lights dimmed and Gomez felt the control center become colder and the air even thinner. Gomez took a dozen deep breaths, got down on her knees, reached into her kit for the appropriate tool, and began opening the panel under the life-support console. If Captain Gold thinks I'm the cause of this problem, Gomez thought, I'd better keep trying to be part of the solution.

* * *

Captain Gold stared at Hidalgo Station as it grew larger in the window of the observation lounge. His second conversation with Gomez had not gone well, in part because Starfleet Command had not been able to finish analyzing the list of prisoners by the time the two-hour deadline was up. Now Abramowitz had asked to meet with him and Soloman in the observation lounge to discuss what she had learned from reading Gomez's personal logs. She hadn't sounded happy, and as Gold turned to take his seat at the table perpendicular to the cultural specialist and the computer technician, he could see from their faces that they were not the bearers of good news.

"I take it," he said to Soloman, "that you were able to override the security profiles on Gomez's personal logs?"

"Yes," the Bynar answered softly. "And having done so, I stored the logs in a general access file."

"Which I scanned through," Abramowitz put in. "There was a lot of material there, Captain, too much to do more than get a cursory overview in such a short time. But I pulled out a few telling passages. This one is from about three months ago." Gold steeled himself as Abramowitz lifted up a padd and began to

read from Gomez's logs. "I must find a way to force the Federation to realize what it has become, what it is becoming: a nightmarish dystopian state that stifles dissent, imprisons those who love freedom, and builds horrible weapons like the Wildfire device to serve its need to destroy all those who oppose it." Abramowitz stopped reading from the padd and looked up at the Captain. "It only gets worse from there."

"The Wildfire device wasn't developed as a weapon," Gold said, "no matter how many lives it cost us in the end."

"Correct, Captain," Soloman said tonelessly, "and Commander Gomez was certainly aware of that."

"So," Carol continued, "this shows her thinking had become distorted and delusional by three months ago at least; perhaps Commander Duffy's death hit her harder than we thought."

"I requested her Starfleet psychological profile," Soloman said, "and it does not show a propensity for this kind of mental instability. I'm at a loss to explain how she came to be in this state."

"Humans are often more complex than our psych reports would indicate," Captain Gold said to the Bynar. "We like to think we know each other, but there are always things that remain buried within us that can erupt unbidden."

"Sir," Abramowitz said, "this means that it's really Commander Gomez doing this. I was hoping—"

"For mind control or alien possession? So was I." Gold took a deep breath and accepted the situation for what it seemed to be. "So we switch tactics." He tapped his combadge. "Gold to Corsi." A half second later the Vinci security chief responded, even though she was under orders to sleep and heal after being wounded in the violent encounter on Artemis IX.

"Yes, Captain?"

"I need you in the observation lounge as soon as you can get here."

"Acknowledged."

Gold turned his attention back to Soloman and Abramowitz. "When Corsi gets here, we'll bring her up to speed. She's trained for negotiating in this kind of situation."

"Yes, sir," Abramowitz said. Her expression told Gold that dealing with one of their own on this level was as hard on her as it was on him.

"Carol," he said softly, "Gomez needs help. She's sick, same as if she'd broken her leg. We'll stop her, get her out, and get her through this."

Abramowitz smiled wanly back.

"Sir," Soloman asked, "I still remain uncertain that we have properly assessed the situation. There is something..." The Bynar trailed off, his speech hesitating almost the way it had when he first became solitary. "I request permission to continue my investigation into Commander Gomez's records over the last three months."

"Granted," Gold said. Over the years, he'd learned never to stand in the way of a subordinate with a

hunch.

The door to the lounge slid open and Corsi stepped in, still favoring her left foot. The EMH had patched her up after she was wounded on Artemis IX, but it didn't have quite the deft touch Dr. Lense had.

It hadn't been six minutes since Gold had asked Corsi to join them, and he was certain she'd been sound asleep when he called. Yet here she was, her eyes bright, her uniform pressed, her blond hair pulled back in her usual bun. "You move quickly," Gold said to her.

"Part of the job. So," Corsi said, "someone want to fill me in? Has the commander gone nuts or what?"

✱ ✱ ✱

Commander Gomez was busy fighting with the life-support controls. The computer was still ignoring her inputs, and the brilliant idea she had come up with to bypass the blocks was taking a lot more effort than she had thought it would going in. Gomez had noted that the readout lights were still providing accurate information, and had to be maintaining a connection to the life-support and communications nodes, so she might be able to piggyback on the connection and send control signals down the same line.

It was cold enough that her hands were getting a bit numb, she was panting in the thin air, and it wasn't helping her concentration to have to listen to Domenica Corsi using what were colloquially called "nutball" negotiating strategies to try to convince the fake Gomez on the screen to give up her insane plan. That sharp-as-a-tack "Core-Breach" Corsi couldn't tell that the Gomez on the screen wasn't her hadn't made sense until the security chief had begun reading passages from what she claimed was Gomez's personal log—things she'd never written.

Whoever did this to me, Gomez thought as she worked one end of the console board out of its slot to get access to the circuit connections underneath, put a ton of effort into it and is no slouch technically—they've had to bypass not only Starfleet security protocols, but the extra ones I put on my personal logs. It wasn't impossible, obviously, since Corsi was able to read out parts from her logs—even if it was nasty things about the Federation that she'd never even thought of writing. But it would take someone with expertise at least as great as Solomon's—and the Bynar knew the Starfleet security protocols going in. Gomez decided she wanted to meet whomever set this thing up, first to congratulate them, then to punch them in the eye.

Who has it in for me that bad? Gomez thought, blinking her eyes against an arc of electricity that burned out what she had hoped would be the last circuit of her brilliant improvisation. The Androssi? This isn't their style. Those Ferengi we met a while back? No, we helped them. Luaran? She's still in custody, and besides, it'd be Corsi she'd be peeved at. Gomez sighed. The S.C.E. so rarely dealt with anyone on a personal level that it was hard to think of anyone she had irritated so much that they would go to all this trouble to get back at her. As far as I know, she thought as she burned her fingers pulling out the blown circuit, I haven't killed anyone's brother, mother, sister, father, or even their second cousin. I don't live a perfect life, but I can't think of anyone I've pissed off badly enough to single me out for something like this.

The wiring finally replaced with ones cannibalized from other consoles, Gomez fed power into the reworked circuitry. It had been difficult, detailed, and intermittently painful work to wire up a device that would backfeed along the readout connection, send control signals back to the life-support nodes and put them under her command. It was brilliant, innovative engineering done in the midst of a high-pressure situation with lives at stake, just what the S.C.E. had built its reputation on. The only problem was it wasn't working. Gomez sighed. Back to square one.

Soloman sat across from Carol Abramowitz in the observation lounge and reviewed everything the computer had on Gomez. The Bynar found nothing out of the ordinary. The commander, as mentally uncompiled as she had become, had nonetheless managed to stay on top of her duties right up until she left on her ill-fated shore leave. On her most recent mission, the one that took the *Vinci* to Empok Nor, she had acted with her usual top-notch professionalism—and saved Soloman’s life. There was simply nothing in her words or actions to show that her thought processes were getting buggy.

Soloman knew little of human psychology, but pattern recognition of many different kinds was part and parcel of how to deal with computers, and it seemed to him there was no pattern here. Soloman sighed. He was still tired from working desperately to reprogram an ancient defense device before it could disintegrate his crewmates, and he couldn’t help but feel that if he were at his best, he would be able to pull together the sprites of insight that kept fluttering just out of his reach. Perhaps Abramowitz was making headway, or perhaps she would see something he had failed to perceive.

“Carol,” he said, “may I interrupt you?”

The cultural specialist looked up at him from where she had been poring over the list of prisoners that Gomez has requested be released. Her eyes took a second to refocus on him. “Please, interrupt,” she said, “I’m getting nowhere with this list. It’s not what it claims to be, and that’s all I can tell you.”

“What do you mean?” the Bynar asked. Anything that was the slightest bit off might be the clue he needed.

“It’s not a list of political prisoners. With a few exceptions, it’s a list of mass murderers, torturers, rapists—a who’s who among the most evil sentients in the galaxy. No culture in the galaxy would call these people oppressed revolutionaries—they’re criminals pure and simple, and dangerous, deadly ones at that. Like I told Corsi, there’s only a handful of these people it’s safe to even think about letting go.”

“The list, though,” Solomon said, “it was carefully compiled?”

“Clearly,” Abramowitz said, “very carefully, and very completely.”

The idea fluttered by him like a sprite on a computer display. Mentally, he reached out for the controller, took command of the sprite, and brought it back to center screen. He had it.

Chapter 5

On the bridge of the *Vinci*, Corsi was making progress. Whatever had happened to Gomez, whatever psychosis she was suffering from, she wasn’t totally devoid of reason or reasonableness. She could be negotiated with, and she had to be, because the list of “political prisoners” she had provided had finally been reviewed by Starfleet and it was a worst-of-the-worst list chosen from throughout the many different intelligent species of the galaxy, all of whom Gomez was insisting were convicted in show trials on the basis of made-up charges.

Abramowitz had gone over the list in detail, though, and had found one exception to the rule. On the planet Sigma V, the list of criminals wasn’t quite so bad as on the other planets, in part because, it

seemed, Sigma V had far less in the way of crime overall. These were the greatest criminals on the planet, yes, but it was a remarkably law-abiding place and not one of them had been convicted of anything more serious than a drunk-and-disorderly charge. All of them were scheduled to be released within three days anyhow.

“So we have a deal?” Corsi asked the image of Gomez on the viewscreen. “A show of good faith on both sides. We’ll release prisoners from the agreed-on planet, and in return you move the station life-support up ten percent. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Gomez said back. “I really don’t want to hurt anyone; I’ll move the life support up five percent when I receive word from my confidential sources that the prisoners have been freed from confinement, another five percent when I have word they’ve been taken on a Mark 17 hauler-class ship to Bartha IX and released to go their own way.”

“Not a problem,” Corsi said. Hauler-class ships were heavy cargo vessels that also carried a few dozen passengers on each run—they were the workhorses of that area of the galaxy and available in great numbers. All that was left was to contact the government of the planet in question and arrange for the prisoners to be released, a problem for diplomats since the planet was non-Federation, but not one that struck Corsi as complex. “We’ll talk again in one hour,” Corsi said, “I should have all the details for you then.” Gomez agreed to that too.

* * *

In the observation lounge, Gold took Corsi’s report as somewhat positive news in a bad situation. “So that’s the deal, Captain. Starfleet has made the arrangements, and the prisoners on Sigma V are being prepared for immediate release. Station life support has already gone up five percent, and when we get word the hauler has arrived at Bartha IX, I fully expect the life support to go up another five.”

Gold nodded. As hostage situations went, this one seemed to be working out relatively smoothly, and if it weren’t for his personal involvement, he would have been much more relaxed and upbeat than he was. Even if they managed to keep everyone on the station alive, and get Gomez out alive as well, he had lost his first officer. As all captains were, he was prepared to lose those under his command—but not like this, not to a mental collapse no one had seen coming.

“I realize this seems like only a short-term solution, Captain,” Corsi said, “but the books all say that if you can get the target to give an inch, you’re well on the way to getting the mile.”

“Maybe,” Gold said, “whatever has driven Gomez to this behavior isn’t strong enough to turn her into a mass murderer.” And perhaps she can be helped back to a normal life, Gold thought, even if Starfleet would no longer be part of that life.

“Let’s hope,” Corsi said, “but the books also say that nothing is one hundred percent.” She was interrupted by the lounge door opening. Soloman and Abramowitz stood in the doorway. The Bynar asked the captain for permission to enter.

“Granted,” Gold said. The expressions on their faces spoke of a certain amount of embarrassment, but on the whole they seemed upbeat. “Tell me you two have better news this time.”

“We do,” Abramowitz said, as Gold motioned her and Soloman to seats near Corsi.

“Good, I could use some. What is it?”

The two of them glanced at each other, and then Soloman began. “We do not believe that the entity you have been conversing with is Commander Gomez.”

Gold almost didn’t process that. It took Corsi a moment to pick up on it too, which Gold used to ask the heavens above to make this true.

Corsi raised an eyebrow and turned to the Bynar engineer. “Then who have I been negotiating with for the last two hours?”

“We believe it to be a computer simulation of Commander Gomez.”

“Oh, that’s just great,” Corsi said.

Soloman was not in the habit of making statements he couldn’t back up, but this was almost too good to be true. Gold said, “That would be one heck of a simulation, and what about Gomez’s personal logs?”

“On closer review,” Abramowitz said, an apologetic tone to her voice, “we think they are an elaborate fabrication.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Gold said, playing devil’s advocate above the table while his fingers were crossed under it. “Personal logs have very tight security, as do Starfleet computer systems. Your revised conclusion is based on what?” Gold asked. “You found something in her records that didn’t ring true?”

“No,” Soloman said, “It’s what we didn’t find.” Before Gold could ask, the Bynar began to explain. “Carol,” Soloman indicated the woman to his left, “reviewed in detail Starfleet’s report on the prisoners whom ‘Commander Gomez’ was demanding be released, to aid Commander Corsi and give her some insight into Commander Gomez’s current psychological state.”

Abramowitz cut in, their back-and-forth reminding Gold of when Soloman had been part of a Bynar pair. “The choices were entirely consistent with the extremist positions that had been expressed in the commander’s logs, so I thought nothing of them beyond their obvious insanity. Soloman, however, focused on the extent and complexity of the list. There are thousands of names on it, spread out throughout the galaxy, from Federation and non-Federation planets.”

“I know that,” Gold said, “Please continue. Soloman, no need for false modesty. We’re burning time here.”

“Yes, sir,” Soloman said. “As you acknowledge, the list is quite extensive and detailed. Compiling it would be the work of months, at least. It took Starfleet hours just to confirm it. To dig up the information in the first place would have been a monumental task.”

“And?”

“And Commander Gomez never did any such thing. To compile the list would have taken myriad contacts with myriad planetary governments and their criminal tracking systems. Theda Vinci records show no such communications transmissions or data exchanges between Theda Vinci and any planetary government on that topic—none at all, from anyone.”

“It’s out of our line.” Gold then asked, “Could Gomez have gotten the information when she was off-ship? Or could she have wiped the communications files?”

Abramowitz shook her head. “Ship’s records, compared with the time of the incarceration of a number of prisoners on the list, show that Commander Gomez was right here on the *Vinci* when some of that information became available. And what my modest Bynar friend here is reluctant to say is that while it might just barely be possible for her to have wiped the communications files on the *Vinci* beyond his ability to trace—barely possible—it’s not possible for her to have wiped systems on worlds all across the galaxy to that extent. We’ve checked those systems, and they show no such inquiries from anyone who could possibly have been Sonya Gomez.

“The only reasonable solution is that the commander could not have collected that information. And yet the Sonya Gomez we have been dealing with clearly does have it. Therefore...”

Soloman picked up the thread. “...that is not Gomez, but a simulacrum, a very good one.”

Gold leaned forward, while allowing himself to believe in this new, much wished-for scenario. “In that case,” he said, “where the hell is my first officer?”

Corsi jumped in. “Sir, sensors confirmed that she is alone in the station command center. So unless sensors have also been rendered unreliable, she’s in there.” Gold was impressed by how quickly Corsi had changed gears, adapted to the new situation. Not surprised, but impressed. “If she’s okay...”

“No reason to assume she isn’t unless we learn otherwise, Corsi,” Gold said, his natural optimism enhanced by the sudden change in the situation. “Go ahead.”

“Then despite the static field that’s been placed on station communications, a tight-beam transmission focused on her specific combadge frequency should be able to establish a link with her.”

Gold raised his eyebrows at that. Technical information was not the security chief’s forte. Soloman and Abramowitz seemed a bit surprised themselves.

“What?” Corsi said. “You work with engineers all these years, you pick stuff up.”

Gold stood up, and as he did so he allowed the edges of his mouth to turn upward for the first time since they had received the first message from the computer simulation of his first officer. “Soloman, get that signal to Gomez. Corsi, continue the negotiation with the program. It may be reporting to someone, let’s keep it—or them—from suspecting we’re on to it. You two,” Gold said, addressing Soloman and Abramowitz, “good work.”

✱ ✱ ✱

Commander Gomez was taking a forced break from her struggles with the equipment. She lay on her back on the floor with her legs above her chest just as prescribed by Starfleet hypoxia training. The position diverted her poorly oxygenated blood to her brain and cleared some of the fog out of her head. She was worn out, not just by the thin air but from banging her metaphorical head against metaphorical walls and was worried that if she didn’t take it easy for a minute, she might start banging her literal head against the literal walls. Besides, lying on her back on the floor and watching Corsi negotiate terms with the fictional Gomez was entertaining, in a bizarrely surrealistic way. Rooting against “herself” was particularly mind-bending.

Corsi had just finished explaining the precise details of a prisoner release from Sigma V to “Gomez” and was now confirming with “her” the particular prisoners who were included in the release. To Gomez’s

earthborn ears and oxygen-starved brain, the alien names sounded like a bunch of nonsense syllables strung together: Rendar Grepnackten, Yarnat Netgrel, Jertnal Echttoy, Ardack Sprachnee, Lemann Tacketo, Sibkel T’Nuncen. In her current state Gomez found Corsi’s recitation hypnotic, and she caught herself falling asleep. In low-oxygen conditions, that could be deadly. With an effort, she rolled to one side, then forced herself to stand up. She walked on shaky legs over to the control console to start trying once again to get a handle on the situation.

Something nagged at her as she pushed switches and dials almost randomly, looking for some kind of reaction that would give her a clue to a way in. Something on the list of names Corsi had read off sounded familiar, but she was certain she knew no one from that planet. But there was something, something recent, maybe something important. What was it? With some effort she was able to bring the conversation between Corsi and “Gomez” back up on the display and replay it. It took almost a dozen run-throughs before she spotted it.

Okay, she thought, now I understand what’s going on. But I can’t do anything about it from in here. If only I could tell someone outside this goddamn control room.

At that moment her combadge chirped.

Gomez almost didn’t recognize the sound, then for a moment, couldn’t believe she’d heard it. The combadge chirped again. “Corsi to Gomez, respond please,” Gomez heard, and struggled to her feet while simultaneously tapping her combadge.

“Gomez here,” she said. “Very happy to hear from you.” Gomez held her breath for a tense moment—for all she knew, this communication wasn’t meant for her, but for her computer-generated duplicate.

“Hate to have to ask you this,” the security chief’s voice came back, “but what was the last thing I said to you before you left for shore leave?”

Gomez could feel her combadge getting hot—whatever signal they were using to punch through the static field around the station, it packed a pretty good punch. She took a deep breath and thought back. “You said, ‘Live it up.’ You satisfied it’s really me, now?”

“Yes. You up to speed on what’s going on?”

“Actually, I may be a little ahead of you,” Gomez answered. “Just wasn’t able to tell anyone about it. With some help, I think I can get the station back online, and catch the bastard who did this.”

“Anything you need,” Corsi said.

“Great. Patch me through to Soloman right away.”

“He’s listening. You owe him a thank-you when this is all over. We’ll explain later.”

“Soloman,” Gomez said, “I need you to lower the security levels on the da Vinci communications array and find me a particular piece of tribblecom.”

“That,” Soloman’s soft voice came over her combadge, “is an unusual request.”

“I know,” Gomez said, “here’s what I’m looking for.” She rattled off the key components of the

tribblecom she had deleted just before all this started. “I have work to do here—flag me when you’ve found it.” Gomez smiled for the first time since the whole nightmare had started.

Chapter

6

It had taken Soloman only moments to locate the particular tribblecom Gomez had requested, but it had taken her several hours of hard work to link her combadge directly into the station communication and computer systems. It was dual access—it would let her talk to the *Vinci* via the station’s communication array, and it would allow Soloman, on her command, to upload the tribblecom directly into the station computer’s memory unit. In the meantime, to keep the program busy, and in case what Gomez had in mind didn’t work, Corsi was continuing to “negotiate” with the false Gomez, which added the bizarre note of Gomez’s own voice ranting on in the background as she worked.

At last she was ready. She hoped this would work, because if it didn’t, she was entirely out of ideas. “Okay, Soloman,” she said, “let it rip.”

“Upload commencing,” Soloman replied.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Then the Gomez on the display screen began to falter, as if searching for her next word. The Gomez image froze, then moved again but in a jerky, unrealistic fashion. It tried to speak, but it’s voice was first garbled, then became more of an incoherent squeak like nails on a blackboard. The screech got loud enough to make Gomez cover her ears, but then the picture on the screen broke up into a random array of tiny squares, each containing a different distorted image of Gomez.

Then the screen went black, and at the same time, the lights on the board in front of Gomez flashed green shields were down, life support was climbing back to normal—and while the systems were running slow, due to the tribblecom, they were holding steady. A noise behind her made her turn quickly, but it was only the control center door sliding open, at long last able to obey the signal from the switch she had pressed. . . just how long ago it was Gomez wasn’t certain. On the other side of the door stood Tobias Shelt and the three station engineers. All four of them started talking at once, but before Gomez could even start to answer them Captain Gold’s voice came over the comlink.

“You okay in there, Gomez?” he asked.

“Just fine now,” she said, waving the others to silence. That was true. Her headache had vanished the moment the control room doors slid open.

“Glad to hear it,” Gold said. “I’ll let Starfleet know they can call off the prisoner release on *Sigma V*.”

“Sir,” she said, “I think I figured out who caused all this and why. I’ll want to check this with Commander Corsi, but if I’m right, Starfleet should let the release go ahead.”

“Interesting,” Gold said, “then I’ll tell them to let it continue. Looking forward to your explanation, Gomez. Prepare to be beamed aboard.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tobias Shelt motioned to her as the transporter beam caught her—he was signaling that she should call him. She had time to signal back but didn't, and then the control center faded out.

* * *

Ardack Sprachnee, former finance minister for Sigma V, was not surprised when he was told his thirty-day sentence for drunk-and-disorderly behavior in the council chambers was being commuted. After all, he had not only arranged to be in jail in the first place, he had arranged for his and his fellow prisoners' release and for the type of transportation that would be provided.

The guards ushered him and his fellow parolees to just inside the large metal bars of the prison gate, and he listened with rapt attention as the warden explained that due to events far beyond his control, the Federation had requested their early release, and that they be transported to Bartha IX by hauler. As the protest started—his fellow prisoners objected, this close to the end of their sentences, to being released so far from home—the warden explained that the Federation had provided return transportation as well.

The warden went on to say that the whole thing sounded as foolish to him as it did to them, but orders were orders, and a free trip to Bartha IX would certainly beat another night in their cells. That, Sprachnee noted, was a point the other prisoners agreed with wholeheartedly, and so did he. So while there was puzzlement among the released prisoners, there was no resistance to the notion, especially when luxury hovercars pulled up to the gate to take them to the spaceport.

There were intoxicating drinks in the hovercars, but Sprachnee left them to his seatmates. He had to keep his wits about him, because this next part was tricky, and his timing had to be precise.

They pulled up to the cargo ship, and were led on board it by guards, but once everyone was in their seats and the door was closed, they were free—and a cheer went up from the crowd. Sprachnee ignored the noise; he was busy looking through the packet of personal effects that had been returned to him. Yes, there it was. He took a certain device in his hand and waited for the sound of engine startup. As the whirring kicked in, he pushed the button on what looked like a small writing implement. The lights on the hauler flickered for a second, but that wasn't unusual at startup.

The lighting levels returned to full power in moments, but Sprachnee stayed tense until he was certain the pilot hadn't noticed the drain on the energy levels—and why should he, Sprachnee thought, since this little gadget of mine has tweaked his readouts to ignore the massive cargo he's just taken on?

While there were times when Sprachnee wasn't certain whether it was the lure of being fantastically wealthy or the simple intellectual challenge of the thing that motivated him, he usually tilted toward the latter. How to get five billion bars of gold-pressed latinum, the entire wealth of the planetary government, off-planet? That had been quite a problem to solve.

Sprachnee's position as finance minister was one he had worked long and hard to get because it gave him access to the codes that worked the shielding on the planetary latinum storehouse. Coming up with the rest of the scheme had taken a long time, and many false starts.

Sprachnee relaxed into his seat for the trip to Bartha IX, secure in the knowledge that, per the readout on his little device, the buffer on the cargo transporter of this very ship now contained, in super-compressed coding, all five billion bars of latinum that made up the planetary treasury of Sigma V, and in their place was a hologenerated image that wouldn't fool people forever, but would for just long enough. When they landed on Bartha, another push of the button and the latinum would be beamed to thousands of mini transporters he had hidden all over the planet on his last vacation. From there it would

be a simple matter to recover the latinum piece by piece.

Sprachnee sat calmly in his seat for the entire trip, which took most of a day, not tensing up until the pilot announced their landing approach. As soon as the heat shields were dropped, Sprachnee was ready to push the button, disperse the latinum, and become one of the galaxy's richest men—under an assumed name and species, of course.

The ship landed, and Sprachnee's finger was on the button in a moment. Oddly, though, the shields weren't dropping. Probably just a malfunction. Maybe he should offer to help them resolve it?

Without his noticing their arrival, two Starfleet officers in security uniforms were suddenly flanking him. Both were very large, very strong, and were very polite as each took one of his arms and hefted him from his seat. They patted him down expertly, quickly taking his gadget and all his emergency backups away from him. The taller of them tapped his combadge. "It's okay, we have him, you can drop the shields."

* * *

Gomez stared at the short little balding man who had caused all the trouble. Sitting sadly in his old-fashioned metal-barred cell, he didn't look like any kind of a threat. It almost hadn't been worth the high-speed shuttle run it had taken to get Corsi and herself to Bartha IX, but Gomez just had to meet the man who had done this to her. She needed to learn what she had done to him to make him single her out.

"Are you sure that's him?" she asked. Corsi nodded. "I've never met him before. I have no idea what his beef with me might be."

"Well, let's ask him. Hey, Sprachnee," Corsi said. "Come over to the bars. Somebody here wants to see you."

The little man stood up and walked over, and it was clear to Gomez that he didn't recognize her any more than she recognized him. Gomez looked at him, looked him up and down carefully. "Why me?" she asked him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said politely, "but I don't know what you're talking about."

"Why me?" Gomez asked again. "Why did you pick me for this thing out of the entire galaxy?"

"Oh," Sprachnee said, "was that you?" The little man paused, then continued. "I was in a cell, remember, I wasn't able to watch my program play itself out. I'm sorry for the inconvenience."

"Everything that happened was done automatically, by your program?"

"Yes."

"But," Gomez was losing patience, "why did the program pick me?"

"Tell me," he said, "did you get a call on a communications link just after you deleted the tribblecom?"

Gomez thought back. Yes, there had been a call, with no one there. It had asked who she was, then disconnected—oh, no. "Yes. It asked me my name."

“Well, there you go,” Sprachnee said. “Once the program realized its surroundings were apropos to the mission, it found a target subject, asked for your name, ran your records, found your image on file, located your personal logs, rewrote your journals on the basis of what your mission records said you’d been through, et cetera, et cetera.” He sighed. “It could have been anyone, anyone at all, almost anywhere in the Federation. It was my bad luck, Commander, that it was someone like you. If you hadn’t figured it out...or,” he said wistfully, “if even one of the billions of sentients who have read the tribblecom by now had taken me up on the prima facie offer, I’d be a rich man instead of rotting in a cell, for good this time, I fancy.”

“So my involvement in this was just—bad luck?” Gomez said.

“That’s correct.”

That wasn’t possible. He’d known enough about her daily schedule to track her to Hidalgo Station. Enough to rewrite her journals. Enough to create a simulacrum of her that fooled her closest friends and associates for quite a while. The only way that would have been possible without detailed knowledge of her background and security codes....

“You wrote a multivariant, adaptive, artificially intelligent superworm that can propagate via subspace, penetrate Starfleet security, and invade personal logs? That can, on its own, extrapolate from personal writing style and records exactly how to convince someone’s closest friends and associates that they are talking to them instead of a program? That can run on equipment with as little processing power and memory as Hidalgo Station has? And that works at nanosecond speeds?”

“Well, yes,” Sprachnee said modestly. “I was pretty proud of it.”

Gomez was stunned. He should be proud, she thought. Sprachnee had written one hell of a sophisticated program, so sophisticated it had taken her quite a long time trapped in a freezing-cold control center to figure out even part of what he’d done. What she’d realized was that Sprachnee had hidden coding in the text of the tribblecom that was set to activate when someone used a glommer to delete the message. When Gomez deleted the tribblecom, she had triggered the hidden code, resulting in the station shutdown and implementing the entire incident that followed.

If Gomez hadn’t been listening to the conversation between Corsi and the simulation, she would never have known that the planet mentioned in the tribblecom and the planet where the prisoners were being released was the same planet, and that Sprachnee’s name, which was on the bottom of the tribblecom, was also on the list of prisoners. She had almost missed it anyway.

Armed with that knowledge, when Soloman figured out it wasn’t really her on the screen and established communication, she had had Soloman locate Sprachnee’s tribblecom, the one that had started all the trouble. As the tribblecom reentered the Hidalgo computer system through the combadge link Gomez had set up, it clogged up the memory unit again—and crashed the complex program controlling the station, allowing the established station programming to reassert at least intermittent control. Gomez had figured that Sprachnee’s program wouldn’t be set to defend against itself, and fortunately, she had been right.

Back on the *theda Vinci*, with full information in hand, Gomez had suggested, and Corsi and Abramowitz had then confirmed, that the list of prisoners to be released had been set up to manipulate Starfleet and the Federation. The only prisoners on the list who didn’t seem a real threat were the batch of prisoners on *Sigma V*. It was therefore predictable that Starfleet would offer to release them first—especially predictable to someone who had read the Starfleet negotiation manual, as Sprachnee, Gomez thought,

most likely found a way to do.

The records on Sigma showed that Sprachnee had made certain he was among those prisoners by acting out so badly in the council chambers that he would not only be fired, but would be thrown into jail. The tribblecom had also made clear what Sprachnee was trying to get away with—the biggest latinum heist in history. From there, the specification of a hauler-class ship, the only ship class in the area with both a passenger complement and transporter buffers large enough to contain that much latinum, was a dead giveaway.

Gomez looked quizzically at the little man who had caused her so much trouble. “Why’d you bother with all this?” she asked. “Don’t you know how much you could have sold your program for? It would make five billion bars of gold-pressed latinum seem like lunch money.”

Sprachnee waved the notion away. “Where would the fun have been in that?” he asked her. Then he stopped and looked thoughtful. “I don’t suppose we could cut a deal now? I show you everything I know about the program, you get me out of here?”

“We’ll see,” Gomez said. She was angry at what he’d done, to her, to her reputation, the risk to the lives of those on Hidalgo Station. Gomez wrestled with conflicting emotions, but in the end she was an engineer, and the program he’d written would impress the best engineers in the galaxy. “I’ll talk to someone. But don’t hold your breath.” To her own surprise, instead of punching Sprachnee in the eye as she’d thought of doing, Gomez stuck her hand through the bars in a gesture of respect. Sprachnee hesitated for a moment, then took her hand and shook it firmly.

As Gomez and Corsi left the holding area, Gomez wondered what would be next for the strange little genius. “What adjudication facility is he being sent to?” Gomez asked the security chief.

“I’m not sure,” Corsi said. “Why?”

“Because it had better have damn good security tech, or we’ll be hearing from him again really soon.”

* * *

Shortly thereafter Gomez found herself back where she had been a week ago, about to beam down to Hidalgo Station. This time she wasn’t going alone—most of the crew of the *Vinci* would be visiting the station, some to help put all their systems right, others simply for much-needed shore leave. Gomez was doing a little of both—she would help the day shift with repairs on a part-time basis as well as having some time for herself.

She’d already sent word to Tobias Shelt to clear his schedule for dinner, dancing, and who knew what would happen afterward? Seeing “herself” doing things so far from her character had brought things home to her. She could accept that she wasn’t entirely who she had been. What she had gone through with Duffy had forced her to leave some of herself behind, and that empty space in her would have to be filled with something new. Maybe Tobias Shelt would be part of what filled it. Maybe someday Wayne Omthon would be. Or maybe it would be somebody else entirely. She’d take it one day at a time. Smiling, she vanished from the *Vinci* in a cone of light.

About the Author

JOHN J. ORDOVER, former executive editor of the Star Trek fiction line for Pocket Books and

codeveloper of the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* series (with Keith R.A. DeCandido) and the best-selling *Star Trek: New Frontier* series (with Peter David), is the happy husband of Carol Greenburg and the proud father of Arren Isaac Ordover. Ordover is currently the editor-in-chief of *Phobos Science Fiction and Fantasy*, and the author of the upcoming “An Easy Fast” in the *Star Trek* anthology *Tales from the Captain’s Table*.

Coming Next Month: Star Trek™: S.C.E. #53

Fables of the Prime Directive by Cory Rushton

Until the Dominion War, the pre-warp civilization on Coroticus III was under observation by the Federation—and then the Dominion moved in. Forced to abandon the planet—and leave a person behind—Starfleet does not return until after the war is over and the Dominion has pulled out.

Carole Abramowitz and a team from the *da Vinci* must now determine how much the Dominion contaminated Corotician culture—but that’s the least of the S.C.E.’s problems, as they uncover a mass-murderer, who may be the Starfleet officer left behind....

COMING IN JUNE 2005 FROM POCKET BOOKS!