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MANY SPLENDORS  
(*What's Past Book 6*)

Keith R.A. DeCandido



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1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY  
10020

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ISBN: 1-4165-3307-9

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To Dean, Christie, Dayton, Kevin D., David, Aaron, Dave, Greg, Scott, Dan, Jeff, Ian, Mike, Robert G., Glenn H., J. Steven, Christina, Heather, Christopher, Michael M., Andy, Loren, Randall, Allyn, Kevin K., Paul, John D., Glenn G., Terri, Ilsa, John O., Cory, William, Phaedra, Robert J., Steve, Michael S., and Richard

What a long strange trip it's been—you  
guys have been the best, and I look forward  
to more voyages on the da Vinci  
with you and everyone.

#### HISTORIAN'S NOTE

Chapter 1 of this story commences at the same time as the second-season *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "The Measure of a Man" (2365). Chapters 2–9 proceed through the second, third, fourth, and early fifth seasons of the show, with Chapter 10 shortly after the fifth-season episode "Disaster" (2368). The Epilogue jumps ahead eight years to early 2376, taking place a few months prior to *The Belly of the Beast*, the first S.C.E. story, shortly after the Dominion War ended in the final episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

## CHAPTER

# 1

Captain's log, Stardate 42523.7. We are en route to the newly established Starbase 173 for port call. Crew rotation is scheduled, and we will be off-loading experiment modules.

Ensign Sonya Gomez had been practicing The Speech for days.

Originally it was just a speech, one she would give upon meeting her new commanding officer, saying what an honor it was to be serving on her new ship. When she got the word that her request had been approved and she was to be assigned to the Enterprise, it suddenly became The Speech. This wasn't just some old assignment; this was the flagship! She'd be reporting to Lieutenant Geordi La Forge, about whom she'd heard so much from her friend, Lian T'su, who'd graduated a year ahead of her (and would be her roommate on the ship).

Along with another Academy classmate, Ensign Dennis Russell, Sonya had reported to the Enterprise at Starbase 173, and then gone straight to main engineering to meet their new CO, The Speech running through her head the entire time she walked through the corridor. She tried to figure out what to do with her hands. Next to her, Denny looked maddeningly calm.

La Forge took only a few minutes to introduce himself, show them around, and give them duty assignments. Neither ensign got the chance to say anything. "Sorry to cut this short, but I've got a senior staff meeting in a few minutes. Welcome aboard." Despite the hurried nature of the introduction, and the terse tone La Forge had had throughout, he said the last two words with a genuinely warm smile. With the VISOR the lieutenant wore covering his eyes, it wasn't easy to judge his mood, but that smile put Sonya at ease.

But she hadn't had the chance to give The Speech. Worse, she'd studied the engine specs, expecting to be quizzed on them, but La Forge did no such thing. Sonya was assigned to gamma shift at first, serving under Ensign Esmeralda Clancy. This would give her plenty of chances to show off her knowledge of the Galaxy-class vessel, and get to do it in the lower-key atmosphere of the night shift.

The tour ended at the upper core on deck thirty-one. She and Denny walked down the corridors of the deck toward the turbolift. "You didn't get to give your speech," Denny said with a cheeky grin.

"I know. The opportunity never really presented itself." Sonya stifled a yawn. "I need to get some sleep."

"What'd you do last night—or were you up rehearsing The Speech?"

Sheepishly, Sonya said, "That and studying the ship's specs. I was up all night."

Smirking, Denny shook his head. "Figures."

"Denny, I don't want to be—"

"I know, Sonya, I know, I was there for your meltdown before finals, remember? Look, it'll be fine."

Sonya was already tired of hearing that. "Anyhow," she said after realizing that glaring at Denny was doing no good, "since my shift doesn't start for eight hours, and I was already off-kilter from the

starbase's different cycle, I'm gonna catch up on my sleep, make sure I'm in good shape for gamma."

Nodding, Denny said, "Sounds vaguely planlike. Me, I'm gonna see when the holodeck's available. From what I hear, these Galaxy -class ships have state-of-the-art holography, and I've got a great program I want to try out."

Remembering Denny's proclivities from the Academy, Sonya said, "Another murder mystery?"

Rolling his eyes, Denny said, "Yes, another murder mystery. This one's from New York City in the late nineteenth century."

"What, you're gonna solve Jack the Ripper again?"

"That was London. And I already did that."

Sonya chuckled. She remembered that Denny had reprogrammed one of his endless murder mystery holodeck scenarios so that the person who solved the Jack the Ripper case was able to reveal that the killer in question was possessed by an interstellar energy creature, as had been revealed by a Starfleet vessel a century earlier. He had said that getting the reactions of nineteenth-century humans accurate had proven challenging.

"Uh, excuse me," said a voice, and Sonya looked up to see a fellow officer—a junior-grade lieutenant, in fact, wearing the gold of operations and security—coming toward them. He had unkempt brown hair, wide brown eyes, and smile lines around his mouth. "I'm, uh, running late for a staff meeting."

Sonya and Denny stepped aside to let the officer pass. As he did so, he turned, and gave Sonya a long look before turning and jogging down the corridor.

"Who was that?"

Denny shrugged at Sonya's question. "Probably one of the senior staff La Forge was having a meeting with."

"Is it my imagination, or was he looking at me funny?"

"Maybe, but I wouldn't put too much stock in it—most people look at you funny."

Punching Denny lightly on the shoulder, she smiled and they continued to the turbolift.

Sonya took in her new quarters. They were huge .

She had spent most of the last year memorizing everything there was to know about the Enterprise, and had found her quarters without a tour guide, or asking the computer. Sonya's sense of direction had become legendary at the Academy—by the middle of her first year, the fourth-years were asking her for shortcuts around campus—and she was now confident that, just from her intensive study of the ship's specs and diagrams, she could walk from here to the cargo bay with her eyes closed.

Even so, even knowing from those specs just how large the quarters she would share with a fellow ensign would be, she wasn't prepared for the massiveness of the space.

An advantage of the constant annihilation of matter and antimatter that powered a Starfleet vessel was that it provided energy to spare. One of her Academy professors, upon learning of Sonya's assignment to this ship, had laughed, nodded her head, and said, "Ah, the Galaxy-class—a monument to waste." Having specialized in the study of antimatter, Sonya knew as well as anyone how true that was, but she'd never really thought of it in terms of giving even lowly ensigns on a ship that was a thousand strong so much room.

The quarters included a main room containing two desks, a round table, several chairs and a couch, and a replicator. On either side were two smaller rooms. She approached the first, and found it filled with an impressive array of Bolian artifacts. Assuming that this belonged to Lian—who'd had a passion for Bolian art for as long as Sonya had known her—Sonya walked over to the other room, which was undecorated, and furnished with a bunk, another desk, and another replicator, as well as a door that she assumed went to the commode.

As she had indicated to Denny, ship's time was off a bit from the starbase; she checked the computer station on the desk and saw that alpha shift had ended a few minutes earlier. Lian was, like Sonya, on gamma, serving at ops on the bridge during the night shift, so her roommate's lack of presence here was a bit of a surprise.

Lian and Sonya had shared a plasma physics class a year earlier. Though the former was a year ahead of the latter, they'd become fast friends, and Lian had continued to write to Sonya from her posting to the Enterprise. Reading of Lian's adventures and her descriptions of the amazing new Galaxy-class ship, Sonya realized that this ship was where she simply had to be assigned. She'd been driven from the moment she'd first applied to the Academy, but the letters from Lian made her realize that this was the only place she could possibly go.

She realized that catching up on sleep wasn't really an option. While she'd made a thorough study of the ship's specs, she still needed to compare that to how the engines were now with the specs it had at Utopia Planitia a year and a half ago.

The doors parted with a swish, and Lian entered. She was rubbing her round face with her hands, her dark curls poorly held in by an attempt at a ponytail.

"Lian!"

Taking her hands away from her face to reveal her large, expressive eyes, Lian burst into a grin. "Sonya! You're here!"

The two friends ran to each other and embraced in a tight hug. Though they'd stayed in touch, they hadn't seen each other since Lian's graduation a year earlier. "It's so great to see you," Sonya said to Lian's shoulder. "I'm so glad we got assigned together."

"We were lucky," Lian said. "Phylo was just promoted to junior-grade lieutenant, and she transferred to the starbase. She couldn't handle the pace here all that well. So I had the space, and quartermaster was kind enough to say yes."

They broke the embrace. Lian reached behind her head and yanked the hair-tie out, letting her curls spill loose about her shoulders. "Much better. Sorry, I was doing a double shift, and on alpha, I try to keep my hair up." She smirked. "Something about the captain being around makes you want to remain tidy."



“I bet. Why were you doing a double?”

“Commander Data resigned. I couldn’t believe it when I heard.” Lian walked over to the replicator. “Green tea, hot.” The replicator hummed, and a ceramic mug with steam rising from its mouth coalesced into being. She took a quick sip of it, and a transformation came over her: her eyes brightened, her other features softened, and she seemed to slouch a bit. “Much better.”

“Why did Commander Data resign? Isn’t he the android?”

“Well, even if he hadn’t, I still would’ve pulled a double.” Lian slowly walked over to the couch. Sonya did likewise. “He was being transferred to the starbase so they can experiment on him.”

Sonya frowned. “Experiment? Can they do that to an officer?”

Shrugging, Lian said, “Apparently. Anyhow, Commander Riker didn’t have a chance to redo the shift rotation, so he asked me to stay on for alpha, and I did. We’re just orbiting the starbase, so it didn’t require a lot of concentration.” She took another sip of the tea, then set it down on the table. “But enough about me, how’re you?”

“Excited.” Sonya leaned forward on the couch. “I haven’t met Ensign Clancy yet—Lieutenant La Forge said I’d be working for her—and I just can’t wait to get started when gamma starts.”

“Good.” Lian stood up. “I can take you to Ten-Forward, then.”

“That’s the lounge, isn’t it?” Sonya asked.

Lian nodded.

“I can’t. I’ve got way too much to do.”

“Sonya—”

Also standing, Sonya said, “No, I’ve got to unpack and get ready for the first shift.”

“There’s nothing to get ready for, Sonya.”

“I have to make a good impression with Clancy. I don’t want her to think I’m just some dumb ensign right out of the Academy. I want to show her what I can do.”

Lian shook her head. “Sonya, you don’t have to prove yourself.”

“Yes, I do. You just said your last roommate couldn’t handle it. I have to.”

“Look, La Forge is going to be very easy to work for. He’s a good officer, and a great supervisor. Engineering was a disaster area before he got his hands on it.”

“Wasn’t he the one in command when you got battle bridge duty that time?”

“Yes. He was excellent under pressure, kept us all focused.” She smirked. “Well, me and Solis. I think Worf was born focused.”

“Worf is the Klingon?”

Lian nodded. “He’s been in charge of security since Yar died. It’s too bad—she was a good officer. Worf’s a little too tightly wound for security.”

“I thought security people had to be tightly wound.”

“Maybe.” Lian shrugged. “Anyhow, you should come to Ten-Forward.”

Shaking her head quickly, Sonya said, “I have to study the ship’s engine tonight. You remember what Dr. Ra-Havreii said?” She stood straight and put on the Efrosian’s gentle, deep voice. ““A ship ceases to resemble its blueprints—””

Lian joined in, doing her even better impersonation of their former Academy professor. ““—within the first month of it being in space.’ Sonya, you’ll have plenty of time to study it while you work on it.”

“I can’t do that—I need to be ready to do this job right now .”

Letting out a long sigh, Lian said, “You haven’t changed a bit, Sonya.” She chuckled. “No, I take it back—you’ve gotten worse . Sonya, you’re already here .” Before Sonya could say anything else, Lian held up a hand. “All right, if you don’t want to come, I can’t force you, but I need to relax, so I’m going. If you want to join me—”

“—just take the turbolift up one deck, go right, keep on down that corridor until I get to section 2B, make a left, then make an immediate right, go straight until I hit Ten-Forward.”

Laughing, Lian said, “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you already know your way around. We’ll talk later, okay?”

“Count on it.”

After Lian left, Sonya went into her room, stared at her duffel for a moment, then sat at the computer desk and called up the up-to-the-minute specs on the Enterprise’s warp core. Lian had said that engineering had been a mess, which tracked with the letters Sonya had been getting. The Enterprise had gone through an unprecedented four chief engineers in its first year. With that, the fact that the ship was the first off the line of a new class of vessel, and the types of things the flagship dealt with on what seemed to be a weekly basis, the engines had probably gone through a lot. She needed to know what the engines were like.

She also wondered who that guy was on deck thirty-one.

CHAPTER

## 2

Captain’s log, supplemental. As happened with our sister ship, the Enterprise is beginning to experience a series of system failures. So far they are random, but I fear they could be early symptoms of what happened to the Yamato.

“Need some help?”

Sonya looked up with bleary eyes to see a vaguely familiar officer, wearing a junior-grade lieutenant's pips on a gold uniform. "I'm sorry?"

"I asked if you needed some help."

It took Sonya a minute to remember where she was. "God, I must've drifted off. I'm sorry, I—" She inhaled through her nose, exhaled through her mouth—a stress-reduction technique her sister, Belinda, had taught her when they were kids, and one that occasionally worked. This was not one of those occasions.

She'd worked two straight shifts, having come on early during beta shift, and worked all the way through gamma. Ever since downloading the log from their sister ship, the U.S.S. Yamato—which had subsequently exploded, killing all aboard—the Enterprise had been suffering from massive systems failures.

La Forge had put her and Clancy in charge of making sure nothing untoward happened with the warp core. It was a catastrophic collapse of the Yamato's warp core that had led to its destruction. Clancy was currently in the upper core, testing the diagnostic systems.

Finally, she placed the face of the lieutenant in front of her as the one from deck thirty-one her first day on board.

"I'm sorry," he said, holding out his hand. "Kieran Duffy. I just came on, and Lieutenant La Forge thought you could use a hand. You're Clancy?"

"No, Sonya Gomez," she said, returning the handshake.

"Ah, okay. Sorry, I've been on alpha and beta, so I never got to know you gamma folks. Never much of a night owl, myself." He grinned. "Not that it matters, since it's always night out here. So, uh—do you?"

Sonya blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"Need help?"

"Oh." Sonya picked up her padd, as she found she had no recollection of what she'd just done or what she had to do next. "I just ran a diagnostic on the antimatter control systems. They're fine, amazingly enough. Now I have to reset all the control functions on the warp drive, since right now they're reading that the core's been ejected."

"You sure it hasn't been?" Duffy made a show of looking over at the warp core. "No, wait, there it is. Guess we'd better reset it, then."

Sonya rolled her eyes. "Honestly, Lieutenant, I don't."

Now it was his turn to blink. "Don't what?"

"Need help. I'm perfectly capable of doing this myself."

"Maybe, but the ship's falling apart at the seams, and you've been working for two straight shifts. I just got out of bed, so I'm a lot more bright-eyed and bushy-tailed than you." He looked at the top of her

head. "Okay, with that hair, maybe you're more bushy-tailed, but you get the idea."

"Lieutenant—"

"Look, Lieutenant La Forge ordered me to help you out, and he sorta kinda outranks both of us. For that matter, I technically outrank you. So let's just assume that whole 'need help?' thing was rhetorical. What's after the reset on that little list of yours?"

Sonya stared angrily at Duffy for a second, then finally looked back down at the display on her padd. "Make sure the flow regulators are still functioning."

"Fine, I'll do that."

Where did La Forge find this idiot? "No, you can't, because you need the computer for that, and I'll be resetting it."

Duffy frowned. "No, I won't. I can just—"

Her voice rising, Sonya said, "Lieutenant, you can't check the flow regulator systems if the computer's being reset!"

"Uh, Ensign?" Duffy was staring at her with a concerned look.

"What?" she snapped.

"You didn't say flow regulator systems, you said flow regulators, which I can check by opening up the antimatter housing and taking a gander."

"The regulator's completely okay," Sonya said, "I just checked it—" She looked down at the padd again. "—half an hour ago. It's the systems."

"You didn't say the systems."

"Yes, I did."

He walked closer to her. He was a lot taller than she, and he was now staring down at her. "Ensign, the word 'systems' never escaped your lips."

"Fine, if you say so," Sonya said, though she was sure, absolutely sure, that she had said "flow regulator systems." "After that is a diagnostic on the containment unit."

Sounding almost triumphant, Duffy said, "Which is a separate system, and which I can do while you reset the computer."

Letting out a long breath, Sonya said, "Whatever you say, Lieutenant." She walked over to the computer and started up the reset sequence. "It can't be the flow regulators, anyhow. This is a computer problem, not a mechanical one."

Duffy was now standing over at one of the wall consoles and calling up the diagnostic for the containment unit. "Or it's a design flaw."

Looking up sharply, Sonya said, "It's not a design flaw."

"How do you know? The Galaxy-class has only been out for a little over a year. Sure, they ran every test possible in Utopia Planitia, and the shakedown went okay, but a ship this size has about a thousand things that can go wrong."

"This isn't a design flaw. I've studied this ship from stem to stern, Lieutenant," Sonya said angrily, "and there's no way this is due to a design problem. For one thing, like I said, it's the computer that's having a malfunction. It could be an invasive program—a tribblecom."

"Oh, come on." Duffy turned away from the containment unit diagnostic to look at her with amusement. "The Enterprise is protected against that kind of thing. Besides, tribblecoms don't do this kind of damage. I think you're letting your imagination run away with you, Ensign."

Sonya couldn't believe she was listening to this. "I don't have an imagination, Lieutenant," she said before she realized what words were actually escaping her mouth.

Duffy burst out laughing. At her aggrieved look, he got control of himself. "I'm sorry, Ensign, that was just too good."

"I miss something funny?"

Mortified, Sonya whirled around to see Clancy standing behind her. Bad enough this idiot was intruding on her work, now he was making fun of her. "Uh, sorry, Ensign Clancy, I—"

"Ah, you're Clancy," Duffy said, stepping around Sonya with his hand out. "I'm Lieutenant—"

"—Duffy, right," Clancy finished, grasping the lieutenant's hand. "Geordi said you'd be helping out. Thanks."

"No problem. I'm doing the diagnostic on the containment unit while Ensign Gomez finishes resetting the warp drive controls and checks the flow regulator systems."

"Good," Clancy said.

Duffy smiled and turned back to the containment unit.

Hoping her cheeks weren't turning as red as she feared, Sonya looked down at the display and finished the start-up sequence for the reset.

Just as she realized what had gone wrong and had lifted her hand to fix it, Clancy said, "Uh, Sonya, are you sure it's a good idea to—"

"I know, Ella," Sonya said quickly. She and Clancy had gotten on a first-name basis fairly quickly, especially since it was often just the two of them working together. Sonya had set the entire engineering system to reset, not just the warp core controls. If she'd done that, they'd also lose impulse. At present, they were heading toward some planet or other at sublight, and losing impulse control would be disastrous, especially with everything else going wrong. As she input new commands, she said, "It was a mistake, I'm sorry."

"Actually, it was my fault," Duffy said from behind her. "I was distracting the ensign with the joke about

the monk, the clone, and the Ferengi. That's, uh, why I was laughing—I was trying to gether to laugh, you see.”

With an amused glance at Sonya, Clancy said, “Doesn't appear to have worked.”

“No, sir,” Sonya said. Then she found herself unable to resist smiling. “I'm afraid I don't find Mr. Duffy at all humorous.”

“Well, it isn't really that good a joke. Anyhow,” Duffy said, “it's all my fault for distracting her. Won't happen again.”

Clancy nodded. Sonya found herself relaxing for the first time since the Yamato blew up. When Clancy turned her back, she gave Duffy a grateful look for taking the heat. He just gave her a goofy grin in response, and got to work on the containment unit.

Halfway through alpha shift, La Forge had insisted that Clancy and Gomez go off duty. Both women had tried to convince him that they were fine, but when Ella referred to their CO as “Fa Lorge,” and Sonya found herself incapable of remembering the term “warp core,” they both agreed that they needed rest. Sonya paused only long enough to do a personal log, during which she found herself saying how cute she thought Kieran Duffy was once she got past his goofball exterior, and then she crashed.

Lian woke her up ten hours later, at which point it was all over.

Sonya walked over to the replicator. “Hot chocolate, please.” She turned to Lian while the replicator hummed with her order. Her roommate was seated on the couch with a green tea cupped in her hands. “What happened?” The hot chocolate materialized, and she said, “Thank you,” then walked over to join Lian on the couch.

“It turned out that there was an Iconian computer program in the Yamato's log. It was overwriting our computer sys—”

“Iknew it!” Sonya said as she sat down. “Itold him it had to be a tribblecom of some kind.”

“This wasn't just a tribblecom, and who's ‘him’?”

“Duffy—a lieutenant from alpha shift. La Forge asked him to help me and Ella out. He insisted it was a design flaw, and when I told him it was a tribblecom, he laughed at me. Okay, there was something else, when I misspoke, but still, he was laughing, the big jerk. And what do you mean it wasn't just a tribblecom?”

“If it was, it was a tribble the size of the moon. This program was rewriting the entire computer system. They finally fixed it by purging the memory and restoring it from the protected archives.”

Sonya nodded. “Makes sense. It means they lost everything from after we downloaded the Yamato log, but—” Her eyes widened. “Oh, no!”

Lian tilted her head. “What's wrong?”

She bounded up from the couch and went over to the terminal, only to see that her personal log wasn't

there. In fact, everything after stardate 42609.1 was gone: her last two personal logs and the log of all the repairs she did on two and a half shifts. “Now I’ve got to write all that all over again.”

“So’s everyone else, I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Thinking back over what she wrote in the more recent personal log, she decided it was best. What was I thinking, talking about how someone’s cute in a personal log? What if somebody read that?

Shaking it off, she sat back down while Lian told the rest of the story, about the Romulan ship, the Iconian base they found, and the away team peculiarly led by Captain Picard himself, and how Data was almost killed by the same program that invaded the Enterprise. Sonya was relieved at that. While she had yet to be formally introduced to the android, she’d seen him in engineering a few times, and had of course heard about the captain’s defending him on Starbase 173, helping establish the android’s sentience, which Sonya had actually thought was a given, though Lian hadn’t. She was glad he was okay, and that nobody was seriously hurt.

“But that’s not thereally good part,” Lian said with a smile. “I’ve got a date!”

Sonya blinked. “Huh?”

“You know Soon-Tek Han in security?”

“No.” Sonya didn’t even know who any of the other engineers besides Clancy, Duffy, Russell, and La Forge were. She had far too much work to do to pay attention to security people.

“He’s very nice, and he’s invited me to have dinner with him in Ten-Forward tomorrow. Isn’t that wonderful?”

“I guess,” Sonya said hesitantly. She couldn’t imagine the notion of having time to go on a date. She had her duties, and then she spent her off-duty time going over everything, to make sure she hadn’t missed something, or catching up on the technical journals so she wouldn’t lose track of what was going on while she was out here, or sleeping. Plus, there was always extra work. Geordi La Forge ran an efficient engine room. He had been working with some noncommissioned kid—Lian had said he was the son of the former chief medical officer, and was an “acting ensign,” whatever that meant, due to his great genius—to adjust the deuterium control conduit, even though it was well within specified norms, and if he was going to nitpick the engines that much, Sonya had to stay on her toes. The notion of a social life seemed utterly alien to her.

“Well, I hope you two have fun,” she said gamely, wishing the best for her roommate.

“Thanks. He said he was going to pick the cuisine. Can’t wait to see what it is.”

Sonya smiled, then checked the chronometer and frowned. “Ugh, I’m back on shift in twenty minutes.” She looked down at herself. “I gotta shower and change.”

Both women rose and moved to their respective bedrooms.

“I need sleep,” Lian said. “Talk to you later, Sonya!”

Sonya started removing her uniform as she entered her bedroom. Heading toward the commode, she ordered the computer to read her the table of contents from the Journal of Applied Warp Mechanics.

The latest issue of JAWM had been released the day before, but in the hustle and bustle of the Iconian mess, she hadn't gotten to it. As she showered, she instructed the computer on which articles to flag.

She was not going to be caught out without knowing everything.

CHAPTER

### 3

Captain's log, stardate 42737.3. It has been six weeks since our entrance into the Selcundi Drema sector. Each system has revealed the same disturbing geological upheavals on every planet.

Sonya was reading an article on her padd while exiting her bedroom and trying not to scream. "I don't believe this!"

Lian was eating breakfast at the large table. Swallowing her steaming oatmeal, she asked, "Don't believe what?"

"This idiot is writing an article on subspace accelerators."

Frowning, Lian asked, "Didn't you write a paper on that?" before scooping more oatmeal into her mouth.

"Yes, and this Doctor—" She touched a control to get the article header, with the author's name. "—Xe'r'b'w'r's'o is talking through her fur. The magnetic containment unit she has will break down after the first time it's used, and her alignments are all completely off-kilter. Anybody builds an SA to these specs is just asking for trouble—it's more likely than anything to just fall apart. I proved that in my paper, but she doesn't even cite it!"

Lian shrugged. "So write to the journal and complain."

Walking over to the replicator, Sonya shuddered and said, "Oh, I can't do that." To the replicator, she added, "Hot chocolate, please."

"Why can't you?"

"I'm just a Starfleet ensign—when I wrote the paper I just was a third-year cadet. Dr. Xe'r'b'w'r's'o is the leading authority on subspace at Thelian University—I couldn't just write in and say she's an idiot. I mean, sure, in our cabin, that's one thing, but I can't write a letter." She looked at Lian. "Can I?"

Shaking her head, Lian said, "I don't understand you, Sonya. You're one of the brightest people I've ever met, and you push yourself to be better than the best—but you refuse to realize it."

Sonya almost shrunk in her chair. "I'm not anything special."

"Yes, you are." She held up a hand. "Forget it, I'm tired of beating my head against that particular wall. I have to go. Soon-Tek and I are having breakfast."

Staring at Lian's now-empty bowl of oatmeal, Sonya asked, "So why did you just eat oatmeal?"

"Because he wants to have a Vulcan breakfast. Vulcan food makes me gag, but he likes it, so I agreed,



and stocked up on oatmeal first.” She smiled. “Hey, listen, what’re you doing after your shift?”

“I’ve got to finish this journal, and then there’s the paper I promised to JAWM that I really need to finish. And I may wind up pulling a double, if the wunderkind’s team asks for another sensor recalibration.”

“Oh God, another one?” Lian rose from the table and laughed. “How many different ways can they scan these planets?”

“I’m starting to think it’s infinite.” The young “acting ensign”—Wesley Crusher—had been put in charge of a team of Enterprise science officers to determine why all the planets in the Selcundi Drema sector suffered from horrendous geological instability. The team hadn’t made much progress, but it wasn’t for lack of finding new and more interesting ways of scanning a planet’s surface over the past several weeks.

“In any event,” Lian said, “me and some others have been getting together in Ten-Forward to chat and gossip and such. It’s myself, Costa, Van Mayter, and Allenby.”

Sonya vaguely recognized the other names—the first two were engineers, and Allenby was a shuttle pilot, maybe—but said only, “I don’t have time, Lian, honest. There’s just so much to do.”

Lian walked over to the replicator to recycle the oatmeal bowl. Shaking her head, she said, “Sonya, one of these days you need to relax. Maybe go on a date yourself. What about that Duffy guy?”

Sonya blinked. She’d hardly thought about Duffy since the Iconian mess, and hadn’t seen him except to pass in the corridor once or twice. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you should still come to Ten-Forward. For one thing,” she said with a feral grin, “I’ve gotten some really good gossip. Do you know that Data’s been talking to some girl on one of the Dreman planets?”

Sonya looked askance at Lian. “That’s crazy. Isn’t that a Prime Directive violation? Data isn’t capable of that, is he?”

Lian shrugged. “He’s sentient, remember? To my mind, that makes him capable of anything.”

Now it was Sonya’s turn to grin. “Weren’t you the one saying he was just an android?”

“Maybe I was wrong.” Lian went to the door. “I’ve got to get to breakfast. If you change your mind, we’ll be in Ten-Forward, at the corner table, at 1930.” With that, she left.

Sighing, Sonya finished reading the doctor’s article. When she was done, she thought on Lian’s words. Perhaps she should write the letter; perhaps she did need to slow down; and perhaps she should see how Kieran Duffy spent his off-duty time.

The computer startled her out of her reverie. “Ensign Gomez, you have received a communiqué from Belinda Gomez on Earth.”

Getting up and stretching, Sonya said, “Put it on the screen.” She turned to face the wall with the viewscreen, which lit to life with the Federation logo, followed by the round face of Sonya’s older sister.

“Hey, Ess, it’s me. Just wanted to check in with you on your big old starship. I got your last letter, and I’m not sure what scares me more. First you say that your captain was duplicated and that three of your

crewmates were trapped in a re-creation of a bad novel. Then you talk about those inspectors from the starbase checking over your work. The part that scares me is that you didn't think the first part was a big deal, but you wouldn't stop complaining about the second part. You're weird, Ess, you know that?

"Anyhow, all's well on the home front. Looks like we're going to the Federation Cup again this year. We've just got one more game to go, but I'm pretty sure we'll be able to nail it down. We just have to beat the Stars tomorrow night, but their goalie's a pushover.

"I had dinner with Mami and Papi last night—they're doing well. Papi says you don't write enough, but that just means you only write once a day. Anyhow, I gotta go. Talk to you later, Ess!"

Sonya shook her head. Belinda's soccer team was going to the Federation Cup. Again. The last time they played the Stars, Belinda scored all three goals in a 3–0 victory.

And she got to see their parents more often, being on Earth.

All thoughts of acceding to Lian's requests left her mind. She couldn't afford to take the time for letters to journals or gossiping in Ten-Forward or going on a date—not when she had her sister the famous soccer player to live up to.

When Sonya arrived in engineering for her shift, Clancy was waiting for her. "I've got some news, Sonya. When we're done in Selcundi Drema, there'll be some changes."

Sonya didn't like the sound of that at all.

"Don't worry," Clancy said quickly, "they're good changes. There'll be some crew rotation, is all. Ensign Gibson's transferring off, and I'm taking over beta shift at conn."

Sonya's eyes widened. "You're getting bridge duty? Ella, that's great!"

Clancy smiled. She'd been bucking for bridge duty since before Sonya came on board. "And you're getting bumped up, too. La Forge wants you on alpha."

Her stomach dropping, Sonya said, "Alpha shift?"

"It's a great opportunity," Clancy said, as if Sonya didn't know that.

"Oh, definitely. Absolutely. This'll be great." Sonya let out a breath as Clancy smiled at her and headed over to another part of engineering.

This is going to be a disaster, Sonya thought, crestfallen. Working right under La Forge's nose? I'll never be able to live up to that standard.

"Excuse me, are you Ensign Clancy?"

Sonya looked up from the console to see the wunderkind himself. "No, I'm Ensign Gomez."

"Oh, sorry—Wesley Crusher." The young man offered his hand, and Sonya took it. He had a firm grip. "I'm heading up the team looking into the—"

“—geologic instability, I know,” Sonya said with a smile. “What do you guys need this time?”

“An icospectrogram. The problem is, stellar cartography’s using the starboard sensor array for their mapping, and if they stop what they’re doing to give us the sensor nodes we need, they’ll have to start over.”

Sonya chuckled. It sounded like the young man had been rehearsing that speech before coming in here. “Can you use the port array?”

“The problem is I need five—”

“—contiguous arrays to make it work, so I need to reassign nodes four, seven, and eight in order to give you guys enough to work with, right?”

The kid grinned. She couldn’t help but grin back—the kid’s enthusiasm was infectious. “That’s right. Thanks alot, Ensign, I really appreciate it.”

“It’s not a problem, and call me Sonya.” She felt ridiculous being called “Ensign” by this kid for some reason. “Give me a few minutes to finish up what I’m doing here, and then I’m all yours.”

As Sonya completed the diagnostic she was in the midst of, she couldn’t help but ask, “Why are you running an icogram, anyhow? You think there’s dilithium on these planets?”

“There might be, yeah. Ensign Davies found indications of tracher deposits.”

Sonya nodded. “And where there’s tracher, there’s dilithium. Makes sense. You definitely want to be as thorough as possible.”

“Exactly what I said!” Wesley got a wide-eyed look that Sonya had seen all too often in the mirror. “Davies thought it might be a fool’s echo, but Commander Riker put me in charge of finding out what’s happening, and we’ve got to cover all our bases.”

“Yeah, but”—Sonya took one last look at the diagnostic, saw it was compiling normally, then turned to face Wesley—“dilithium wouldn’t explain this instability. I mean, you’d need more dilithium than there’s ever been in one place, and not even Archer IX has that much dilithium.”

“Maybe.” Wesley seemed a bit deflated. “It might be a dead end, but we’ve got to be sure. Besides, it can’t hurt to find out if there’s another source of dilithium.”

“True.” Sonya smiled. “All right, then, let’s go redistribute the sensors.”

## CHAPTER

# 4

Memo from Ensign Esmeralda Clancy to Lieutenant Geordi La Forge, stardate 42760.9. I believe that Ensign Sonya Gomez bears watching. She has one of the finest engineering minds I’ve ever seen, but she’s in danger of burning herself out. She has tremendous drive, but to the exclusion of all else. I’ve never seen her in Ten-Forward, she’s never booked leisure time on the holodeck, she’s constantly working extra shifts, and I’ve never seen her socializing with anyone beyond her roommate. It’s my

recommendation that she be given more guidance than I've been able to provide.

Alpha shift hadn't been as bad as Sonya had feared. Although Geordi La Forge was a perfectionist, he wasn't an unreasonable one, and he never asked his people to do anything they couldn't. He was very hands-on, to the point where Sonya wondered why he bothered even having a staff, but he could delegate when it was called for.

She also saw a lot more of Wesley Crusher. Although nominally assigned to the bridge as the alpha-shift conn officer, Wesley—partly in preparation for his Academy studies, partly due to the kid's sheer brilliance—also did quite a bit of work in engineering. The icogram he'd requested had been the right call, as had Sonya's caveat. It would indeed take more dilithium than had ever been recorded to have it be the reason for the geologic stresses wracking Selcundi Drema, but that's just what the icogram found on Drema IV. The Enterprise was also able to prevent that world from being destroyed, thus saving its native civilization. Sonya had heard a lot more rumors like the one Lian told her about Data talking to a girl on the surface, and several people had said they saw Data walking the corridors with an alien child nobody recognized, but again, Sonya didn't put much stock in the rumors.

She did, however, put stock in Wesley. The kid was the genuine article. They'd spoken a few times since she switched to alpha, regularly interrupting each other and throwing ideas back and forth.

When she had her first break on her third day on alpha, she walked over to the replicator near the corridor entrance and requested a hot chocolate.

Laughter from her left caused her to look up to see La Forge chuckling and walking over to her. "We, uh—we don't ordinarily say 'please' to food dispensers around here."

Sonya smiled. Lian had said much the same thing when she ended her first dinner request with a "please," and she gave La Forge the same answer she had given Lian then: "Well, since it's listed as intelligent circuitry, why not?" However, with Lian, she'd stopped there. Now, she went on. "After all, working with so much artificial intelligence can be dehumanizing, right? So why not combat that tendency with a little simple courtesy?" Turning to the replicator, she reached for the hot chocolate and said, "Ah, thank you."

"For someone who just arrived, you certainly aren't shy with your opinions." As La Forge spoke, he walked into main engineering.

Sonya absently followed him, gripping the hot chocolate with both hands, and realizing she should've cut herself off. Lian was used to her babbling, as was Ella, and Wesley had been babbling right back. But with La Forge... "Have I been talking too much?"

"No." La Forge said the word emphatically, but Sonya wasn't having any of it.

"Oh, I do have a tendency to have a bit of a motormouth, especially when I'm excited." Or awake. "And you don't know how exciting it is to have gotten this assignment." And then, suddenly, before her brain could tell her mouth to shut the hell up, her mouth barreled forward with The Speech. "Everyone in class, I mean everyone, wants the Enterprise." "Wanted, you idiot, you're not a cadet anymore!" "I mean, it would've been all right to spend some time on Rana VI, do phase work with antimatter—that's my specialty."

"I know," La Forge said, "that's why you got this assignment."

Sonya's stomach started doing cartwheels. He knows my specialty! Then she mentally berated herself. Of course he knows my specialty, he's the chief engineer. He doesn't just take people sight unseen. Shaking her head, she said, "I did it again. It's just that—"

La Forge's voice was soothing. "I know—you're excited. Look, Sonya—"

Eager to receive whatever wisdom the chief engineer was going to provide, she said, "Yes?"

"I don't think you want to be around these control stations with that hot chocolate, do you?"

She looked down at the hot chocolate, as if seeing it for the first time. "Oh, I'm sorry. I shouldn't even have this in engineering. It's just, we were talking, I forgot I had it in my hand." She started to back away from La Forge with almost the same speed with which she was digging herself into a hole verbally. Just shut up and walk away. "I'm gonna go finish it over here."

Realizing as she walked that that probably wasn't the best way to end the conversation, she stopped, turned, and faced her CO. "Lieutenant La Forge?"

He nodded.

"This is not gonna happen again."

Again, he nodded. Satisfied that she hadn't embarrassed herself too terribly much, and at the very least pulled it out at the end, as it were, she nodded back and turned around, intending to take the hot chocolate to the corridor.

As she turned, she crashed right into someone wearing a red uniform.

Great, that's all I need. Someone on the command track getting hot chocolate all over their uniform wasn't exactly going to help Sonya do better with La Forge.

Then she looked up and saw the bald head, hawk nose, and stern expression of Captain Jean-Luc Picard.

Sonya had, of course, seen the captain before. He'd come down to engineering once or twice—not as often as Commander Riker or Lieutenant Commander Data—and she'd passed him in the corridor. On the latter occasions he had given her a nod and a curt, "Ensign," obviously not knowing who she was personally, but able to discern the single pip on her uniform denoting her rank.

This was, however, their first face-to-face encounter.

And she spilled hot chocolate on him.

She spilled a lot more on herself, but that somehow seemed not to matter so much.

"Oh, no! Oh, I'm sorry, oh, Captain—"

"Uh, actually, it's my fault, sir." That was La Forge, coming to her rescue. Great, first Duffy, now La Forge. Is everybody on this ship going to have to cover for me every time I do something stupid?

"Indeed?" said the captain, sounding dubious.

Of course he sounds dubious, you idiot. Sonya started wiping at the captain's uniform with her hands. "Oh, I wasn't looking—it's all over you."

"Yes, Ensign, it's all over me," Picard said in a voice that could've frozen the hot chocolate, which, somehow, he was now holding in his right hand.

"At least let me, sir," she said, still wiping at his uniform shirt.

The captain grabbed her wrist with his left hand to arrest her futile attempts at drying him off. "Ensign, uh—Ensign—?"

Realizing he was making a request, Sonya straightened. "Oh! Ensign Sonya Gomez."

La Forge added, "Ensign Gomez is a recent Academy graduate, Captain. She just transferred over at Starbase 173."

"Is that so?" the captain said to La Forge. Then he looked at Sonya with an expression that wasn't as harsh as Sonya feared it would be. "Well, Ensign Sonya Gomez, I think it would be simpler if I simply changed my uniform."

"Captain," La Forge said emphatically, "I must accept full responsibility for this."

"Yes, Chief Engineer, I think I understand." Picard looked at La Forge, then at Sonya.

And then it happened again. Sonya's mouth took off at a full run before her brain knew what was happening, and the rest of The Speech—which had been cut off by La Forge telling her he knew her background—came pouring out.

"I just want to say, sir, that I'm very excited about this assignment, and I promise to serve you, and my ship—your ship—this ship—to the best of my ability."

"Yes, Ensign, I'm sure that you will." The captain didn't sound in the least bit sure, and Sonya couldn't really bring herself to blame him. You don't call it "my ship" to the captain!

Turning to depart, Picard said, "Carry on." Then he stopped, looked down at his right hand, and then offered the hot chocolate cup back to Sonya. Meekly, she took it, and the captain exited.

Never in her life had Sonya Gomez more wanted the earth to swallow her up. Except, of course, they were on a starship, so she'd have to settle for something else—a warp core breach, maybe?

"Oh, my—" She looked at La Forge, whose VISOR made it difficult to read his expression, which came to Sonya as something of a relief. "First impressions, right? Isn't that what they say, first impressions are the most important?"

"I'll give you this—it's a meeting the captain won't soon forget."

La Forge walked off. Sonya stood there for several seconds. My career's over.

In the time it took Sonya to return to her quarters and change into a fresh uniform, the entire engine room was alive with gossip. Several people referred to her as the hot-chocolate demon, everyone cringed

when she walked near the replicator, and she overheard Cliff Meyers describing the spilling of hot chocolate as “the Picard Maneuver.” By the time the lunch break rolled around, Sonya was about ready to crawl into the warp core.

It was La Forge who again came to her rescue. “Sonya, how’d you like to get some lunch?”

From behind him, Duffy said, “Don’t let her order a hot chocolate, Geordi!” Next to him was Denny, who snickered.

“I’d like that very much, Lieutenant,” Sonya said meekly.

As they walked down the corridor toward the turbolift, Sonya said, “I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am, sir. If you want to transfer me off—”

“Now why would I do that?” La Forge chuckled. “If I transferred everyone who did something embarrassing, the engine room’d be empty in a week. All I care about is the work, and your work is excellent. I read your graduating thesis—now I wouldn’t have requested you if you weren’t the best.”

Again, Sonya’s stomach started doing cartwheels. She had no idea that La Forge had requested her, much less read her thesis. Looking down and smiling, she asked, “Where are we going?”

“Ten-Forward. We’re gonna forget about work. We are gonna sit, talk, relax, look at the stars.” He pointed a vaguely accusatory finger at her. “You need to learn how to slow down.”

It was the same thing Lian had said to her on her first night, and she believed it even less now than she had then. “Oh, no no no no, I can’t do that.”

La Forge stopped walking; so did she. “You know, you’re awfully young to be so driven.”

This was hardly the first time she’d heard those words, and she gave the lieutenant the same answer she always gave: “Yes, I am. I had to be. I had to be the best, because only the best get to be here. Geordi—” She cut herself off, realizing she’d just committed the latest in a series of faux pas. “Lieutenant,” she amended, lowering her head.

“It’s okay,” La Forge said. And indeed, most of the people in the engine room referred to the lieutenant by his first name. But most of the people in the engine room hadn’t spilled hot chocolate all over the captain, so she wasn’t sure where her boundaries lay. “Go on.”

“Whatever is out here, we’re going to be the first humans to see it—and I wanna be a part of that. I want to understand it.”

“Sonya, relax.” La Forge started walking again, and Sonya kept pace. “You’re here. You’ve made it. But you won’t last long bangin’ into walls. It’ll be there for you, believe me.”

“Okay,” she said in a small voice.

“Look, I promise I won’t let anything exciting slip past without letting you know, okay?”

“Okay,” she said with more authority.

“Okay.” La Forge smiled as they entered the turbolift. “Deck ten.”

The lunch had been one of the most pleasant experiences of Sonya's career to date. One of the many reasons why Sonya had turned down Lian's offers of eating here or in the mess with other people was that she had some bad memories of family dinners. It all depended, of course, on how Mami and Belinda were getting along that week. When they were in one of their bad phases, Sonya felt as bad sitting at the dinner table as she had in engineering the entire morning. Those memories were hard to ignore.

But La Forge was an easy conversationalist. He had Wesley's intelligence, but the ensign's youthful enthusiasm was replaced in La Forge with a casual happiness. The lieutenant was doing what he loved doing and what he was particularly good at.

When they returned to engineering, it was back to duty, especially since both the captain and a shuttle had gone missing.

"Obviously," Duffy said in a stage whisper to Kornblum, "that hot chocolate that Gomez ordered was actually a gateway to another dimension and it sucked the captain in before he could change his uniform."

Before Sonya could say anything, Denny walked up. "Hey, c'mon, leave her alone, Duff."

"C'mon, it's just a joke. She understands, right?"

Smiling, Sonya looked at Duffy. "Actually, the hot chocolate was really a special acidic compound that only attacks people of the rank of lieutenant or higher. So watch it, or I'll spill it on you, too."

Everyone laughed at that. Sonya felt like someone lifted the world off her shoulders, as she realized they were laughing with her rather than at her.

"Honestly," Kornblum said, "that wouldn't be the weirdest thing that happened on this ship. Remember when the captain got sucked into that energy cloud that killed Singh?"

"Or when that duplicate captain from the future showed up?" Duffy added.

"Or when that Ferengi controlled his mind and trapped him on the Stargazer?" Kornblum said.

"Or Q."

"What's a Q?" Denny asked.

"All right, that's enough." That was La Forge, walking over from the main engineering console. "We just heard from the bridge. The captain's back."

Sonya frowned. "What do you mean, back?"

La Forge shrugged. "All I can say is, the shuttlecraft's back in the bay, and the captain's in Ten-Forward."

Sonya shook her head in confusion. "Does this count as something exciting?"

Chuckling, La Forge said, "If it is, it slipped by me, too."



The engineers all went back to work. Sonya saw that the antimatter containment unit needed a bit of an adjustment. She worked on that for a little while, until the warp core activated.

“What the hell?” The readouts said that the helm was inactive, and that they were moving at quarter impulse, as they had been since the search for the captain had ceased. Yet the warp core was pounding away as if the ship were at warp nine.

La Forge was by her side in an instant. “What’s happening?”

“I...I don’t know.”

From behind her, Kornblum said, “Sir, according to the velocity meter, we’re traveling at warp twenty-two.”

“That’s impossible,” Sonya said.

“Yeah, well, so’s the captain disappearing and reappearing,” La Forge muttered, “but they both fit the MO of somebody I really didn’t wanna see again.”

The next few hours would, Sonya knew, live in her nightmares for the rest of her life.

The somebody La Forge didn’t want to see was Q. Though Denny didn’t recognize the entity, Sonya did, from her studying of theEnterprise’s missions while at the Academy. He—if the masculine pronoun even truly applied—was a fantastically powerful creature who’d toyed with the ship twice before, including on her maiden voyage. Now he’d sent theEnterprise to the Delta Quadrant, several thousand light-years from the Federation, right in the path of a species known as the Borg.

Sonya had said she wanted to be here seeing things no human had seen before, and she got a hard lesson in the cliché about being careful what you wish for. The Borg ship had attacked theEnterprise, carving out portions of three decks, costing the ship eighteen people. During the frantic repair cycle in engineering, La Forge had had to keep her on track, as she found herself unable to wrap her mind around the fact that eighteen people, some of whom she probably knew, were dead. TheYamato had been bad enough, but she didn’t know anybody there. What if one of the casualties is Lian? Or Ella? Or —

La Forge, bless him, had kept her in line. “We’ll have time to grieve later. Right now, let’s get those shields up.”

Sonya had hoped that “later” would be in her quarters. Eventually Q had taken pity on them and sent them back home to the Alpha Quadrant before the Borg could destroy them. La Forge had let alpha shift—who had all stayed on well into beta—go. Sonya had gone to her cabin only to find Lian crying.

One of the eighteen people lost to the Borg ship was Soon-Tek Han.

Finding herself unable to say anything comforting to Lian, and respecting her desire to be left alone, Sonya instead went to the one place where she had felt comfortable since coming on board theEnterprise

While sitting in Ten-Forward, watching the stars go by as they flew toward Starbase 83 for repairs, Sonya heard a voice. “Surprised to see you here.”

She looked up to see Kieran Duffy, but said nothing.

Looking down at her drink, Duffy smirked and asked, “That’s not hot chocolate, is it?”

The clear glass had an equally clear liquid in it, so Sonya knew the lieutenant was simply teasing. “Tequila, actually. Mypapi always kept a bottle of Petron Annejo for special occasions, which usually meant he only took it out when somebody died. I couldn’t think of anything better to order.”

“Yeah.” Duffy himself was cradling what looked like a beer or ale or somesuch. Both were, of course, synthehol. Enterprise policy was that its crew was expected to stick with synthehol where at all possible. Besides, Sonya really didn’t want to get drunk; she tended to lose control with alcohol, and she had enough control problems as it was.

Realizing how uncomfortable it was having Duffy hover over her, Sonya said, “Have a seat, Lieutenant—unless you’re scared I’ll spill the tequila on you.”

Duffy chuckled. “Thanks. And I’m not worried about that, unless you meant what you said before about the acid.”

“No.” Sonya threw back some tequila. While the synthehol version didn’t get her drunk, it didn’t have the same burning sensation as it went down the throat, either, which Sonya found herself missing.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Not really.” Sonya let out a long breath and shook her head. “I just can’t get it right in my head, you know? Eighteen people just—just gone.”

After taking a sip of his ale, Duffy asked, “You ever have Commander Schönhertz at the Academy?”

“Well, it’s Captain Schönhertz, but yeah.”

“She got promoted? Good for her.” Duffy started turning his ale glass in place. “Well, remember what she used to say?”

Sonya wondered how old Duffy was, if his Academy days were long enough ago that Schönhertz was still a commander. And he’s still a j.g.? That didn’t speak well for his career prospects.

Aloud, she said, ““Space is mean.””

“Yup. Except that’s not really it. Space isn’t mean, because mean implies malice. What space is is uncaring. It’s a brutal environment, but it’s not a nasty one, because it’s not trying to kill you. It just is the way it is. All we can do is work with it best we can.” He smiled. “That’s why I like to fly.”

“You’re a pilot?”

“No, I mean fly. My uncle got me a pair of gravity boots for my birthday when I was a teenager. I loved those things—didn’t stop using ’em until I hurt myself.”

Sonya winced. “What happened?”

Shrugging, Duffy said, “Zigged when I shoulda zagged.” He got a faraway look in his eyes. “I should dig them out, try ’em on the holodeck.”

“What’s the holodeck like, Lieutenant?”

“Hey, c’mon, we’re off duty, Ensign. It’s Kieran.”

“Sonya.”

“Good. And you haven’t been on the holodeck yet?”

She looked down at her drink. “Haven’t had the time.”

“That’s crazy. Last time I checked, humans only needed eight hours of sleep, and each shift is only eight hours. That leaves eight hours to do whatever you want, and you haven’t been on the holodeck?”

Sonya looked up. “It’s not that simple. I have to keep up with the journals and work extra shifts sometimes, and—”

Duffy got a confused look on his face. “La Forge isn’t making you do this, is he? That isn’t his style.”

She looked back down at the drink. “Not really.”

“Trust me, Sonya, you don’t need to beat yourself to a pulp. La Forge is a good guy, and he’s obviously taken an interest in you. That’s a good sign, really. The lieutenant has pretty high standards—which makes you wonder what he sees in me, to be honest.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Sonya said meekly, though she had to admit to have been thinking the same thing.

“Ah, he’s kinda stuck with me. I was part of the original shakedown crew, I served under MacDougal, Argyle, Logan, and Lynch before La Forge got the promotion, and I don’t really want to go anywhere else. This is a great ship.”

“That’s true.”

They kept talking for a while after that—through another drink each—and Sonya found herself unable to recall the specifics of the conversation, but she did feel a lot better when it was over.

When he tossed back the last of his second ale, Duffy got up. “I gotta go—people to do, things to see. It was nice talking to you, Sonya.”

“Same here,” Sonya said with a smile. “Thanks, Kieran.”

“You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER

**5**

Captain's log, stardate 42923.4. Despite misgivings, I have agreed to Starfleet's request that the Enterprise divert to the Braslota system to take part in a war-game exercise. Joining us as observer and mediator is the Zakdorn master strategist Sirna Kolrami.

"Hey there, HC."

Sonya gritted her teeth at Kornblum's greeting as she entered main engineering. For months, the nickname had modulated from "Ensign Hot Chocolate" to "Ensign HC" and now to simply "HC." Never mind the fact that she hadn't touched the stuff since her now-infamous encounter with Captain Picard. Never mind the fact that she'd been responsible for implementing Commander Riker's plan to save La Forge from the Pakleds who'd kidnapped him, thus saving her CO's life and earning herself a commendation. Never mind the fact that she'd taken up Earl Grey tea, the captain's favorite drink, as penance. The nickname remained.

Even in Ten-Forward, people greeted her thusly. The only exceptions were the fellow members of the "corner office," as it had come to be named. Trying to take the advice given her by Lian, Geordi, and Kieran to heart, Sonya had finally taken her roommate up on her offer to join the group of friends in Ten-Forward for drinks. The rest of the group included Tess Allenby, who served as a shuttle pilot and the backup conn officer for both beta and gamma shifts; Gar Costa and Helga Van Mayter, both fellow alpha-shift engineers; and later, at Sonya's own urging, Denny Russell. They took up the port-side corner table. Guinan, Ten-Forward's enigmatic host, often had their drinks ready before they arrived—for Sonya it was Earl Grey—and other people generally knew not to sit there.

"You hear the scuttlebutt, HC?" Kornblum asked her now in engineering.

Sighing, Sonya said, "If you mean about Lieutenant Worf and that Klingon emissary on the holodeck, yes, I did hear." And she wished she hadn't. Klingon sex was one of those things about which she felt it was better to live in blissful ignorance.

"Nah, that's old news—I mean about the Hathaway. I hear La Forge'll be taking some people over there for the war game."

"Really?" Sonya now noticed Riker was in engineering talking to La Forge about something. "Isn't Commander Riker commanding the ship for the exercise?"

Kornblum nodded. "Wouldn't that be great?"

"I don't see why. It's an eighty-year-old ship. What possible use could there be in crawling around an old wreck like that?"

"Oh, I dunno, sounds like an engineer's dream."

Sonya shuddered. "More like a nightmare. I studied some of those old matter/antimatter systems at the Academy. It's embarrassingly primitive. Plus, they couldn't recrystallize their dilithium back then. It was a mess."

"Well, I hope you like cleaning up messes, then, Ensign."

Whirling around, Sonya saw that La Forge had come up behind her without her noticing. "Sir?"

“Commander Riker’s asked me to come along on theHathaway, and asked me to pick the engineers. You were at the top of my list.”

“Oh. Uh, thank you, sir.” Her first thought was that this wasnot what she had in mind when she signed on. She wanted to seek outnew life, not seek out something that was abandoned eighty years ago with good reason. But she’d trained her mouth over the last few months to not put her first thoughts to words. Sometimes it even worked.

“There’ll be a mission briefing here in two hours.”

“I’ll be there, sir.”

After La Forge walked off, Kornblum winced. “I’m sorry, Sonya, I jinxed it for you, didn’t I?”

Thinking back to an embarrassed captain saying, “Yes, Ensign, it’s all over me,” Sonya sighed and said, “It’s not your fault, Bernie. I’ve been jinxed since I walked onto this ship.”

Sonya had been staring at the console innards for a full minute.

Forty-oneEnterprise crew had beamed over to the eighty-year-oldConstellation -classHathaway, led by Commander Riker—or, rather, Captain Riker. For the duration of this mission, he was in command of theHathaway, and so was properly referred to as “Captain.” The mission specs called for a complement of forty, but Riker had asked for Wesley Crusher to come along for educational study.

Staring at the underside of this console, where La Forge had sent her once he got the lights working in engineering, Sonya was grateful for Wes’s presence, as they were going to need all the help they could get. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, staring at the unfamiliar duotronic components and wondering how thehell they flew through space in the twenty-third century with this garbage.

In a shipwide announcement, Riker had said that they wouldn’t be getting much sleep, and Sonya could see why. Even if nobody slept and worked double time, she doubted they could get this wreck going in the two days they had.

To make matters worse, Sonya felt like a fifth wheel. La Forge had presumably taken her along for her expertise in antimatter, but theHathaway was warp-inactive, with no antimatter on board to power a warp drive. Even if they had antimatter, there was no dilithium, either, just some chips of crystals that were of the less-refined variety one got in the twenty-third century when recrystallization wasn’t possible.

“Something wrong, Sonya?”

Sonya looked up to see Helga Van Mayter standing over her. The brunette was holding a tool Sonya didn’t recognize at first. “Is that a magnospanner?” She hadn’t seen one of those since she was a plebe.

Helga nodded. “Yeah, I need it for the manifolds. What’s the matter here? Can’t you get the plasma flow going?”

“You kidding? I’m afraid totouch it!”

“Why?”

She waved her arms. “Lookat it! I can’t even find the Shange shunt.”

Helga laughed. “There isn’t one.”

Sonya’s eyes went wide. “How can there not be a Shange shunt?”

“Mostly by virtue of Shange not inventing the thing until sixty-five years ago. Besides, all the shunt does is speed up the reaction time and make it easier to diagnose flaws. It’s not like you reallyneed it to run the ship.”

That went counter to everything Sonya had been taught. In fact, she remembered Professor Naharodny going on at some length about how if you lost your Shange shunt, you might as well blow the ship up.

“Look,” Helga said, “I need to tune up the manifolds. When I’m done, I can walk you through this, if you want.”

“No, no, that’s okay,” Sonya said quickly. Helga had her own duties to perform, and Sonya was tired of people covering for her. “I’ll figure this out.”

“You sure?”

Sighing, Sonya said, “Not really, but I’m gonna do it anyhow.”

Helga smiled. “Good. ’Cause the manifold’s gonna take at least three hours.” She walked off.

Letting out another sigh, Sonya went back to peering at the inside of the console.

Four hours later, Sonya was grinning ear to ear. Helga, it turned out, had been right—all the shunt did was streamline the impulse drive. She’d doped out the entire system and figured out what needed repairing, what needed replacing, and what couldn’t be repaired or replaced but still worked around.

La Forge came up to her at almost a dead run. “Sonya, just the person I’m looking for.”

Clambering to her feet, Sonya brushed several locks of hair out of her face and wiped sweat from her brow with her sleeve. Holding up the padd she’d been taking notes on, she said, “I’ve done it, Geordi, we’ll have full impulse as soon as—”

“That’s great, Sonya, but we need you for something else.”

Sonya blinked. “But if the impulse drive—”

“Did you do up a schedule like I asked?”

She stared down at the padd. The haphazard notes she’d doodled could, she supposed, be translated into something resembling a schedule. “Sort of.”

“Give it to Costa and Sherman, I need you at the core.”

Again, Sonya blinked. “Geordi, the warp core’s inactive, what do you—”

“Just—come with me, Sonya, okay?”

Sonya shook her head. “O-okay. I’ll be right there.” She looked around, saw Gar Costa, handed him the padd, and then walked off.

“Criminy, HC, is this even in English?” Gar asked, but Sonya ignored him, walking over to where La Forge and Wesley were working with some kind of widget that was hooked up to where the antimatter injectors would be were there any antimatter.

When Wesley moved out of the way, Sonya saw the widget more clearly, and realized it was a module designed to channel high-energy plasma reactions with antimatter. She also realized that she’d seen it before, and not on theHathaway . “Isn’t that your plasma physics homework, Wes?”

Smiling sheepishly, Wesley said, “It was.”

“Now it’s our best shot at warp drive,” La Forge said as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “I need you to calculate the best thermal curve to give us a controlled reaction.”

“And then what?” Sonya asked. She’d been thinking purely in terms of impulse engines for several hours, so it took her a second to reboot her brain, as it were. She ran over the specs of the module from what Wesley had told her. (She also wondered how the hell he smuggled it over here, since they weren’t supposed to bring things over from theEnterprise . If they could have, Sonya would’ve brought a Shange shunt and saved three and a half hours of her life.) “That thing doesn’t have more than a few micrograms of antimatter, right?” she asked Wesley.

He nodded.

“You think the chips we have will be enough to channel the reaction?”

La Forge shrugged. “If it doesn’t, we’re stuck at impulse, which is where we were in the first place. But theEnterprise won’t be expecting it.”

“They won’t be expecting us to blow up, either.” Sonya grinned. “But it should work, yeah. I’ll get right on it.”

“Good.”

She went off to a computer terminal to start working up the equations. Then she stopped. “Uh, Captain Rikerdid okay this, right?”

Both La Forge and Wesley said “Right” a little too quickly.

“O-o-o-okay.” This once, she was more than willing to let someone else take the heat.

By the time they were two hours out of the simulation, Sonya was ready to cry.

The impulse engines were up and running as expected. Gar said that “once we translated your notes,”

the schedule was spot-on. The problem was that the control systems they had available to them were limited, especially since they had to adapt components from the impulse drive in order to accommodate Wesley's module, which meant that the impulse and warp drive components were doing double duty instead of being separated as usual.

"It's only a simulation," La Forge said, "and it's only for a couple of hours. Even the duotronic circuits can probably handle double duty."

"That's not the problem," Wesley said. He had that open-mouthed expression of his that Sonya had learned meant he was scared he was going to get yelled at.

La Forge folded his arms. "So what's the problem?"

Sonya picked it up. "We're still not a hundred percent sure the warp drive will work right. We've only got enough antimatter for a short warp-one jump, and a lot of these components are old and worn out. They haven't been used or maintained in eighty years, and they're not as adaptive as our tech is now."

"The worry," Wesley said, "is that we're going to overload the control systems, at which point the impulse and warp drive will both shut down."

La Forge sighed. "Great."

"Sir," Wesley said with a pained look at Sonya, "I know you signed off on this because if it didn't work we'd still have impulse power. So if you want to—"

"Wes, we can't give up now. We've already hooked everything up." He sighed. "All right, the captain'll be down in an hour for a status report. I want to quintuple-check everything. Wes, you look over the crystals and the reaction chamber. Sonya, you do the injectors. I'll handle the control circuits. Let's move it, people."

Sonya went to check the injectors. She ran every diagnostic she could think of, then realized that the standard diagnostics she was used to didn't take everything into account—like, she thought with a dark smile, the lack of a Shange shunt. She found herself rewriting the diagnostics, which was wise, as she found four programming flaws and one bad hookup she would have missed otherwise.

As she knelt behind the warp core realigning the injector after fixing the bad hookup, she heard Riker's voice booming out over engineering. "The simulation begins in one hour."

"You'll have warp drive, Captain," La Forge said, "though it may not be what you expected."

That's the understatement of the decade, Sonya thought.

"I think that deserves some kind of explanation."

"We'll have warp one for—"

Wesley cut in. "Just under two seconds."

Sonya thought that was generous. One-point-four was her best guess, but Wesley seemed to think he minimized the excess flow of the antimatter.



“That’s not long enough for an escape,” Riker said thoughtfully, “but used as a surprise, it may give a strategic advantage.”

“Sir,” La Forge said, “allof this is theoretical.”

“And if your theory fails to pay off?”

Here it comes,Sonya thought as she fit the injector back in.

“Have you ever driven a Grenthamen waterhopper?”

“Sure.”

“Ever pop the clutch?”

Sonya barked out a laugh and almost dropped her tools. One of the things she loved about La Forge was his way of explaining things. Given half a chance, Sonya would babble for half an hour in jargon before even getting to the interesting part. With two questions, La Forge had conveyed the appropriate information to Riker without getting overly technical.

“You’re saying we’re gonna stall theHathaway ?”

With remarkable calm, Wesley put in, “And theEnterprise will waltz right over and pulverize us.”

Sonya walked out from behind the warp core with a nod to La Forge. Riker smiled at her. “Ensign Gomez.”

“Captain Riker.”

“It’s going well, I hope.”

“I think so. And...and I’ve learned a lot, sir. These old ships have a lot of fascinating technology. It’s impressive, really, they have no Shange shunts, duotronic circuitry, dilithium crystals that break down, no EPS conduits, no isolinear chips, and I’m babbling again, aren’t I?” That last was added when Riker broke into what could only be described as an indulgent smile.

“That’s all right, Ensign. As long as you keep the hot chocolate out of the engine room, we should be fine. Carry on.”

Sonya let out a long breath through her teeth.

An hour later, Sonya sat in engineering, working up a new diagnostic program while keeping an eye on the engines. The war-game scenario had gone rather badly. Lieutenant Worf had hacked into the Enterprise security computer and tricked them into thinking a Romulan warbird was attacking. In the confusion, theHathaway got several dozen simulated hits on theEnterprise . Then, just when La Forge had run into engineering to tell Sonya to help him and Wesley implement the warp jump, a Ferengi warship, theKreechta, showed up and attacked theEnterprise . The latter vessel was unshielded, since its tactical systems were in simulation mode for the war game, and so was especially vulnerable. Transporter and weapons were down.

The daiMon in charge had given theEnterprise ten minutes to give up theHathaway, which they had erroneously concluded to be a prize of value to theEnterprise in order for theGalaxy -class ship to be firing on it.

La Forge and Wesley had gone back to the bridge to talk to theEnterprise . La Forge had left Sonya in charge of engineering, telling her in no uncertain terms to make sure the warp drive worked, as it was now likely their only means of escape from theKreechta .

Now she was monitoring the conversation between the two ships. Data was speaking at the moment. “Premise: The Ferengi wish to capture the Hathaway, believing it to be of value. Therefore, we must remove the ship from their field of interest.”

Kolrami, the Zakhorn observer and moderator, spoke up. “And they will soon relocate it after a two-second warp jump.”

“One-point-four,” Sonya muttered. She still didn’t think Wesley’s module had enough antimatter for two whole seconds.

“There is a way,” Picard said. “Number One, can you hear this?”

“Yes, sir,” Riker said, “we’re all here —waiting for you to pull another rabbit out of your hat.”

“Gar,” she said to Costa, “check over the inertial dampeners. With this warp drive, the last thing we want is to lose that or gravity.”

“Right—wouldn’t want to escape the Ferengi just to go splat on the bulkheads.” Gar ran off to check that.

“Mr. Data?” Picard prompted.

The android said, “On the captain’s command, we will fire four photon torpedoes directly at the Hathaway.”

They actually have torpedoes. That’s something, Sonya thought as she finished off the diagnostic program.

Data went on: “One millisecond after its detonation, the computer will trigger your warp jump.”

Sonya started running the program, and then immediately opened up a new program file on the terminal in front of her. If this is going to work, we’ll need to get this cranky old computer to do it.

La Forge said, “I think I hate this plan. Data, we’re not even sure our warp jump will work.”

“If the warp engines fail to function,” Data said, “the result could be —unfortunate.”

“Very unfortunate—we will be dead.” That was Worf, as ever the voice of bluntness.

Sonya, however, was pretty sure she could do it. She’d spent two days navigating these silly old duotronics, and she was fairly confident that she could make them tap-dance if she had to. Tying the warp drive-execution into the detection of a torpedo explosion was something she should be able to do.

“Captain Riker, I cannot order you to do this,” Picard said, which struck Sonya as remarkably generous. Were she in Picard’s place, she wasn’t sure she’d stop short of giving that order.

“What the hell.” Riker sounded rather morbid. “Nobody said life was safe.”

Sonya looked around, saw that Chao-Anh Aleakala was sitting nervously. “Chao-Anh, I need a fresh set of eyes on this.”

Looking almost relieved, Chao-Anh came over and eyeballed Sonya’s padd.

Picard’s voice sounded over the speakers. “The advantage is that it will appear from the Kreechta’s perspective as though—as though you were destroyed in the explosion.”

As she read over the program, Chao-Anh muttered, “Unless of course we are destroyed in the explosion.”

“We’ll be okay,” Sonya said. To her own surprise, she believed it.

“I hope you’re right, Sonya.” Chao-Anh, for her part, didn’t sound like she did.

Worf said, “That will deceive them only for a few minutes. Their sensors will soon locate us.”

“We’ll only need a few minutes, Mr. Worf,” Riker said, “because you’re going to prepare another surprise for them.”

That confused Sonya. She knew that Worf could get into the Enterprise computer by virtue of being the ship’s chief of security. I guess he has an equal facility for Ferengi computers. Chuckling to herself, she thought, They probably get their security protocols on the cheap anyhow.

Chao-Anh said, “I’m not sure about the timing. I’d go for one-and-a-half milliseconds to play it safe.”

“We can’t fine-tune it that much,” Sonya said. “Besides, Data’s the one who said one millisecond. You’re gonna doubt him?”

“Then we’re agreed,” Picard said on the speaker. “On my mark —four minutes.”

Data added, “Remember, Geordi, if the implementation is off by one millisecond, the Hathaway will not survive.”

Sonya gave Chao-Anh a “see?” look. The other engineer simply shrugged.

Sounding more worried than Sonya had ever heard him, even during the Borg attack, La Forge said, “Data, that’s the one part of this plan we’re all absolutely sure about.”

One minute later, La Forge and Wesley entered engineering. Both Sonya and Denny Russell walked up to them with padds in hand.

La Forge looked right at Sonya. “Tell me the warp drive’s okay.”

Handing him the padd, she said, “Okay, and already programmed to go off when the Enterprise tries to

blow us up, per Mr. Data's plan."

Briefly, La Forge smiled. "Bless you, Sonya. What've you got, Russell?"

Denny held up his padd display. "I've plotted a course that minimizes risk of gravitational fluctuations from either Braslota or the planet when we go to warp. With your permission, I'll send this to Ensign McKnight on the bridge."

"Do it." He walked over to the core. "Let's get this party started."

Wesley went over to the injector control systems, Sonya right next to him. The kid looked nervous as hell. "I hope this works."

"If it does, we owe it to you, Wes," Sonya said. "If you hadn't smuggled that thing over, we'd be stuck."

"And if it doesn't work, theEnterprise will blow us up."

Sonya shrugged. "Like the captain said, nobody said life was safe."

"Yeah, but with these old control systems and the duotronic circuits, and—"

"Hey, don't count theHathaway out. There's some life in these old circuits."

Wes smiled. "Weren't you the one who was afraid to touch anything two days ago, HC?"

Pointing an accusatory finger, Sonya said, "Don'tyou start with the 'HC.' And...well, let's just say I've been converted."

Sonya had only been half-listening to the monitored communications between theEnterprise and the Kreechta, but then she heard Picard say, "You believe the Hathawayhas value? We deny you your prize. Fire!"

"Here it comes." Sonya held her breath.

The ship rocked for a second—Dammit, Gar,Sonya thought,you were supposed to fixthe inertial dampeners if they weren't working! —but then steadied.

Then the walls seemed to stretch for a second. Looking down, Sonya saw that her hands were doing the same thing. It looked similar to the visual distortion of the stars one saw at warp speeds, but of theship, not what was outside it.

Looking over at Wesley, she saw that his face was also distorted, like it was in a fun-house mirror. But oddly, Sonya didn't feel any pain.

Then everything snapped back to normal. This time there was no jerking of the ship.Good work, Gar.

She checked the display. "Warp speed operational for one-point-nine seconds." She looked over at Wes. "You were right."

Now Wesley was grinning ear to ear. "Looks like I was, yeah."

When they arrived in Ten-Forward, the “corner office” already had an Earl Grey tea, a green tea, a synthehol Scotch, a birch beer, a synthehol bitters, and araktajino sitting in front of each place.

Lian raised her green tea as they all took a seat and said, “To Ensigns Gomez, Costa, Van Mayter, and Russell for earning commendations on the Hathaway !”

“Here, here,” Tess Allenby said, hoisting her Scotch. She and Lian were the only ones from the corner office who hadn’t been assigned to Captain Riker, though they had been sent to the battle bridge after the Ferengi attacked, in case the Enterprise needed to do an emergency saucer separation.

They all sipped from their drinks and cheered. “You all did amazing work,” Lian said. “Everybody’s talking about it.”

Denny shrugged as he swallowed his birch beer. “Just another day at the office.”

“C’mon,” Tess said, “doing what you did with an eighty-year-old ship? I’m amazed the thing didn’t fall apart when you blew on it.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Helga said. “Those old systems’ll surprise you—right, Sonya?”

Grinning at her Earl Grey, Sonya said, “Yeah, okay, so I took a little while to get the hang of it.”

“More than a little while,” Helga said conspiratorially.

“All right, all right, more than a little while. But we did it, didn’t we? We made a warp drive and we beat the Ferengi.”

Gar held his araktajino near his face, as if ready to sip it at a moment’s notice. “We made a warp drive with spit and baling wire.”

“And the Crusher kid’s experiment,” Helga added.

Tess made a face. “Not that little twerp again.”

Sonya was surprised by the vehemence of her reaction. “Tess?”

“Look, Sonya, I know he’s your friend, but...I mean, c’mon, he’s a kid. He hasn’t taken one class at the Academy, and Picard’s got him doing alpha-shift conn duties. I’m never gonna get on the bridge during alpha as long as he’s on the ship, especially if he keeps pulling miracles like this.”

“Tess, I...” Sonya hesitated. She’d really grown to like Wes over the past few months, but she hadn’t realized that the “acting ensign’s” position might have had a deleterious effect on the not-so-acting ensigns.

“Look, it’s okay.”

“You should say something to Riker,” Helga said. “He’s a good guy.”

“Please—he’s the one in charge of the kid’s ‘education.’ Who do you think put him in charge of that mineral survey in Drema? The worst thing I can do is complain to Riker about his precious boy genius.”

An uncomfortable silence descended over the corner office for a second before Gar said, “Hey, I hear La Forge is doing rotations again. He’s putting Kieran on warp diagnostics.” He waggled his eyebrows at Sonya. “So now you two can flirt all shift.”

Sonya almost spit her tea. “What?”

Lian gave Sonya an accusatory look. “Flirting? With Lieutenant Duffy? Sonya, you didn’t tell me.”

“We aren’t flirting.”

“Coulda fooled me,” Denny muttered.

“Don’t you start,” she said with a glower at her classmate.

“Hey, I wasn’t the one giggling during the maintenance cycle.”

Tess shot her a look. “Giggling?”

“He—” Sonya sighed. “He told a funny joke. The law of averages was bound to catch up to him eventually, and he’d say something funny. I was just being polite.”

“During a maintenance cycle,” Denny deadpanned.

“Look—”

“And then there was that time during the Mariposa mission,” Gar said.

“And when you two were on the damage-control team when that old Klingon ship attacked,” Helga added.

“And when—”

“All right!” Sonya said, interrupting Denny. “Maybe we are flirting... a little.”

“For very large values of ‘little,’” Denny muttered.

“But that’s all it is. I’m not interested in Kieran Duffy. He’s not nearly as funny as he thinks he is—in fact, nobody’s as funny as he thinks he is—and besides, he’s still a j.g. He’s been in Starfleet for years, and that’s as far as he’s gotten. That’s a classic case of career dead-endedness.”

“So?” Lian asked.

Sonya hesitated. She stared at Lian for a second. All her reasons were true, of course, but that wasn’t the overriding factor. She had, over the past months, taken it easy, and allowed herself to have a social life.

But she hadn’t taken the next step with Kieran Duffy for one simple reason: she didn’t want to go through what Lian went through when the Borg attack took Soon-Tek from her.

Tess used Sonya's mention of career dead-endedness to rant about Wesley again, which in turn led to Denny speculating about his parents, which led to Lian and Helga telling Sonya, Denny, and Tess about Beverly Crusher, which led to a discussion of Dr. Pulaski and her transporter phobia, and soon nobody was talking about Tess's bitterness or Sonya's love life, which suited Sonya just fine.

## CHAPTER

# 6

Captain's log, stardate 43198.7. The Enterprise remains in standard orbit while we investigate the tragedy which has struck the away team. Lieutenant Marla Aster, ship's archaeologist, has been killed in what should have been a routine mission. Whatever the explanation, it will not bring back a valued and trusted officer.

"Hey, Sonya, wait up!"

Sonya paused to let Kieran catch up with her in the deck ten corridor. She was heading to the turbolift, and thence to engineering. Both were on beta shift now—they'd been assigned there for the past few weeks, ever since their encounter with the Shelliak—which started in a few minutes. She'd been grabbing a bite to eat in Ten-Forward and reading a fascinating article in the latest JAWM about soliton waves. "What's up, Kieran?"

"You've been holding out on me, Ensign."

Frowning, Sonya said, "I don't know what you mean." Then she added with a smile, "Lieutenant."

He grinned back at her. "I mean you never told me Belinda Gomez was your sister."

"It's not like it's a secret or anything." Sonya tried not to sound defensive. The fact of the matter was, she had kept it a secret. She had enough of dealing with being in the shadow of Her Sister the Soccer Star for most of her teen years, through to her time at the Academy. "You never asked."

"Oh, okay. I'll remember that from now on when I meet people. 'Say, you don't happen to have any famous siblings or other relatives?' I mean, c'mon, Sonya, it's not like most people would keep that a secret. She's a great player."

"I know, I just—" She sighed. "I spent a lot of time being in her shadow, that's all. You know she saved my life when we were kids? I fell into the Gulf of Mexico when we were out on a rowboat, and she dived in and kept me from drowning." Sonya shook her head. "That was just the start. After that, it was always, 'why can't you be like your sister?'"

"You should invite her on the ship, then. You'll eclipse her in a nanosecond."

Sonya gave Kieran a dubious look. "C'mon. I'm just an engineer."

"Just an engineer? Kiddo, you've been Geordi's golden girl for months. Besides, who else would have the chutzpah to spill hot chocolate on a god?"

At that, Sonya couldn't help but laugh. Just recently, the natives of Mintaka III had mistaken the captain for a deity. It had taken a certain amount of work—and a near-fatal injury to Picard—to convince the

Mintakans that the Enterprise captain was not divine.

“It’s not that big a deal,” she said as they approached the turbolift. “She’s just my sister.”

“Hah. There’s no such thing as ‘just’ a sister. I’ve got one, too, y’know—Amy. Devoted her life to making mine a living hell. Why do you think I signed up for Starfleet? Gets me far away from her and her practical jokes.”

They stood and waited for a turbolift. “Since when do you have a problem with practical jokes?” Sonya in particular was recalling an incident involving Ensigns McKnight and Prixis that required a molecular debonder to be applied in sickbay to their hair. The joke around the ship was that it was that incident in particular that led to Dr. Pulaski transferring off the Enterprise .

“I have no problem with my practical jokes. It’s hers that are the issue. There was this one time—”

The doors opened to reveal La Forge. Right around the time Pulaski left—to be replaced by the woman she replaced, Beverly Crusher, Wesley’s mother—La Forge had been promoted to lieutenant commander. According to what both Kieran and Denny had heard, La Forge had had several of his personnel requests denied because the people he wanted were full lieutenants, and Starfleet wasn’t comfortable with a chief engineer not being the senior-ranked person in the engine room. La Forge expressed his frustration to Riker, Riker expressed it to Picard, and the captain gave La Forge a field promotion to lieutenant commander after only a year as a full lieutenant.

“Duffy, just the man I want to see. You need to come with me to the transporter.”

“What’s happening?” Sonya asked.

“The away team got into a scrape—a bomb went off.”

Sonya’s stomach fell. “Is everyone okay?” She knew that Worf was leading the team, which also included one civilian scientist who was on loan to Starfleet, and two archaeologists, Marla Aster and Leo Antonidas.

La Forge shook his head. “Lieutenant Aster didn’t make it.”

Kieran’s eyes went wide. “Oh my God.”

“Commander Riker wants us to go down there, figure out what happened. Ensign Gomez, report to engineering—you’re in charge till I get back.”

That surprised Sonya. She guessed that all the junior-grade lieutenants on beta shift were going on the team. “Yes, sir.”

“Duffy?” They proceeded to the forward turbolift that would take them to the transporter.

Sonya shivered as she stepped onto the lift. She didn’t really know Marla Aster that well, but she did know that she was a single mother, and had a son on board the ship. What’ll happen to him?

Beta shift had been tense and unpleasant. It was one thing when people died in battle, as they did against



the Borg, but stupid accidents like this didn't sit right with anyone. Sonya found herself reminded of the conversation she'd had with Kieran about Captain Schönhertz and space being mean and/or indifferent.

After the shift ended, she went to Ten-Forward, and found Kieran nursing an ale. She asked Guinan for a tequila, and then went over to Kieran's table. "That's not hot chocolate, is it?"

Seemingly despite himself, Kieran laughed. "No, it's ale."

"Mind if I join you?"

"Never." Kieran said the word rather emphatically.

Sonya took a seat. Guinan brought the tequila over. She held it up and gave the toast that they had told her at the Academy was traditional when comrades were lost in battle. "Absent friends."

"Yeah."

They both drank.

"You knew her, didn't you?" Sonya asked.

Kieran nodded. "We met right after she came on board about eighteen months ago. She was having some kind of problem with the replicator in her cabin—wouldn't give her kid his favorite drink, which was this vile fruit concoction. So I fixed it, and we got to talking—even went on a date or two. Nothing really materialized, though. I don't think she was entirely over her husband, y'know?"

Sonya nodded, though she, in fact, didn't know. She'd never lost anyone closer to her than three grandparents she barely knew.

"Still, she was a great lady. And Jeremy's a really good kid. God, I don't know what's gonna happen to him."

"What was she like?"

Kieran spent the next half hour or so telling Sonya various and sundry facts about Lieutenant Marla Aster, from her proclivity for pink clothing while off duty to her ability to talk for several hours at a time on the subject of the amazing discoveries on Jureosa to her courtship with her husband when they were both studying at Endurance University on Mars.

The recollections were interrupted by La Forge's voice on the intercom. "Lieutenant Duffy, Ensign Gomez, report to main engineering."

They exchanged quick glances, gulped down the rest of their drinks, and headed out. "Wonder what's up," Kieran said. "And hey, Sonya—thanks."

As they approached the turbolift, Sonya smiled up at him. "No problem, Kieran. You were there for me when I was moping in Ten-Forward after the Borg. Seemed only fair to return the favor."

"Yeah."

CHAPTER

# 7

Captain's log, stardate 43489.2. We have arrived at Angosia III, a planet that has expressed a strong desire for membership in the Federation. Prime Minister Nayrok has taken Commander Riker and me on a tour of the capital city.

"Garfield Costa, step forward."

Next to Sonya, Gar took a single step forward. They were in formation in engineering, along with Ensigns Kornblum, Russell, Sherman, and Van Mayter, facing Geordi La Forge and Data. Behind the chief engineer and the second officer were the rest of the engineering staff, most with big smiles on their faces. Several of them had already been promoted as well; Geordi had gone in reverse order of rank, ending with the ensigns who were making j.g.

Data handed Geordi a box, which he opened to reveal a hollow pip. He stepped forward and affixed it to Gar's collar. "I hereby promote you to the rank of junior-grade lieutenant, with all the duties and privileges that entails."

Gar nodded, beaming. "Thank you, sir."

He stepped back, and Geordi said, "Sonya Gomez, step forward."

Until he said those words, Sonya hadn't been able to bring herself to believe that she was really being promoted. Indeed, ever since the infamous hot-chocolate incident, she'd been convinced that her collar would go without any more pips until she finally took the hint and resigned her commission and went into a line of work where she could do less damage.

But after the Enterprise's mission to the Romulan Neutral Zone ended, the promotion list came out, and Sonya was thrilled to see her name on it. Among other things, it meant she got a cabin to herself. Not that she had anything against Lian, but she hadn't had a room to herself since she was seventeen.

Besides, Lian's name had also been on the promotion list, so she was getting a cabin of her own, too, where she said she intended to celebrate along with another new promotion, Lieutenant Tanaka, one of the medical technicians, whom she'd been seeing for a few weeks now.

Ella Clancy had also been promoted; sadly, Tess Allenby wasn't, which Sonya feared would simply make her friend even more bitter toward Wes. In fact, Tess was the only member of the corner office who remained an ensign.

Kieran hadn't been on the list, either, which meant that he and Sonya were now of the same rank. Sonya wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Sonya stood proudly as Geordi affixed the hollow pip to her collar. I can't believe this is happening.

"I hereby promote you to the rank of junior-grade lieutenant, with all the duties and privileges—"

Feeling like she was going to explode, Sonya said, "Thank you, sir." Then she realized what she'd done.

Geordi, however, just shook his head and chuckled. "—that entails," he finished. Everyone else laughed as well.

To her amazement, Sonya didn't feel embarrassed. She was too happy.

Data and Geordi went down the line to the other engineering ensigns in alphabetical order, ending with Helga.

Afterward, everyone in engineering cheered. Even Data, after a fashion.

Turning to Lieutenant Della Guardia, Geordi said, "We've got to get to the bridge—you're in charge, Alfredo."

"Yes, sir," the newly promoted full lieutenant said.

Data and Geordi departed. Sonya knew that Picard and Riker were going to be given a tour of the Angosian capital, so Data was in command of the ship, and Geordi liked to put in time on the bridge, she knew. She suspected that was a holdover from his time as the alpha-shift conn officer before he was given the chief job. If there was one thing she'd learned about Geordi in a year on the Enterprise, it was that he liked to be in the thick of things.

Kieran walked up to her. "Congrats, Sonya. See, I told you. Watch it, inside a few years, you'll be running this place, while I'll just be an ordinary j.g."

"Don't be so sure of that," Alfredo Della Guardia said. "You got yourself a mighty fine performance review, there, Duff."

"I did?" Kieran sounded surprised.

"He did?" Sonya sounded the same.

"Hey!" Now Kieran was mock-outraged.

Alfredo shrugged. "His work's picked up. Maybe you're a good influence on him."

With that, Alfredo walked away.

Sonya wasn't sure what to make of that.

The festivities concluded, it was time to go back to work. With the promotion, Gomez was put in charge of the warp core, which had been Della Guardia's responsibility. La Forge generally preferred to rotate folks, so they were experienced in all aspects of engineering, not just their individual specialty, but he said Sonya's antimatter expertise would prove handy, especially since the Enterprise's warp drive had gotten a lot more and varied use in the past couple of years than expected. The Galaxy-class was still a relatively new design, after all—though the Borg threat had sent Utopia Planitia into overdrive with new ship concepts—and could, Geordi said, use some hand-holding.

As she ran a diagnostic on the warp core, she thought about Alfredo's words. She hadn't really seen herself as influencing Kieran in any way. True, they'd been spending more time together lately. She found she was enjoying his company more and more, in part because he seemed to be taking life more seriously.

Or maybe it was that she was taking life less seriously. The promotion to j.g. had validated what Geordi,

not to mention Ella, Lian, Kieran, Wes, and pretty much everyone else on board, had been saying for a year now: she deserved to be here. And she'd learned quite a bit—probably more in one year on this vessel than she had in four years at the Academy. She'd hot-wired an eighty-year-old impulse drive, helped outwit some alien kidnappers, done damage control against foes ranging from Borg to out-of-date Klingons to unknown aliens to a ten-thousand-year-old booby trap, and learned so much about different approaches to ship engineering.

More important though, she had learned what Geordi had instructed her to learn: to relax.

“General quarters. All off-duty and civilian personnel report to quarters immediately.”

Sonya looked up sharply as she entered main engineering to report for her second day of duty as a lieutenant. The computer's instruction didn't apply to her, as she had just come on duty, but she wondered what had prompted it. Yesterday, the *Enterprise* had taken on an Angosian prisoner named Roga Danar, and this morning was transferring him back to a penal colony on one of Angosia's moons. Sonya's initial thought—What could possibly have gone wrong?—was immediately suppressed. A year on the *U.S.S. Enterprise* had wrested out of her the notion that nothing could go wrong almost as fast as the notion that there were things that didn't have a solution.

From transporter control, Cliff Meyers said, “I don't believe this—Danar broke out of the transporter field!”

“That's not possible,” Kieran said.

Geordi ran over to stand behind Cliff. “I've seen this guy in action, Duffy, don't be so sure of that.”

From behind Sonya at the main console, Ensign Koji Oliver said, “Turbolifts are down, security fields going up on the lower decks.” Then he frowned. “Turbolifts are back up.”

“Who ordered that?” Sonya asked.

“The bridge.” Gar sounded as confused as Sonya.

Geordi went over to the main console next to Koji. “Probably a trick—everyone on the ship knows the turbolifts should be down, but Danar may not. If he sees the lifts are working, he might take one and then we'd get him.”

“Sir,” Kieran said, “I'm not tracking Danar at all. Are we sure he's loose?”

“He's invisible to sensor scans,” Geordi said.

“Oh. Sorry, sir.”

Sonya sighed. Kieran should have known that.

“Phaser on overload! Seal this deck!” That was Worf's voice on the speaker. Before Sonya could even register the words, Geordi had pounced on the console and sealed off section twelve of deck thirty-six.

Sonya held her breath as the seconds ticked by.

Then:“Captain, the overload has been averted.”

Everyone in engineering exhaled. Geordi lowered the force fields in that section, but kept the security fields up. Sonya went back to the warp core to see that her diagnostic was done, and the warp core was functioning normally.

“It’ll be okay,” Kieran said. “I’m sure Worf’ll take care of the guy.”

“Hang on, something’s wrong,” Koji said. “One of the force fields on this deck just went down. The bridge didn’t—”

Koji’s words were cut off, and Sonya heard something fall. She whirled around to see Koji being flipped over someone’s back and onto the console by a fast-moving figure who backhanded Geordi hard enough to knock his VISOR off. Both Kieran and Cliff moved to stop him, but they were taken down, too.

Sonya was about to cry out Kieran’s name as he crumpled, broken, to the deck, but before she could, she felt a blow to the side of her head, and the universe went dark.

The next thing Sonya knew, she was lying on a biobed in sickbay, a throbbing, nauseating pain in her head, and Nurse Temple standing over her. “Wha—what happen’?”

“You’re fine, Ensign, just a bump on the head. You’ll be okay in a little while.”

“Kieran...Geordi...engineer—” She tried to sit up. This proved a rather big mistake, as the room started jumping around, bouncing back and forth, and generally behaving in a very silly manner.

She quickly lay back down.

The nurse smiled and said, “Notice I didn’t say you’d be okay now . Rest, all right? The doctor will be by to see you in a second.”

Temple walked off. Sonya looked around, saw Cliff and Gar, as well as Dershowitz from security on three other biobeds, and Koji sitting in the central biobed, holding his right arm gingerly while Dr. Crusher applied a bone-knitter to it.

What happened to Kieran?

Sonya realized that that was the foremost thing on her mind. The last thing she saw before being rendered insensate was Kieran falling to the floor. She didn’t know if he was alive or dead, and the fact that he might be dead scared her, even more than the notion that Geordi or anyone else might be.

She figured that everything was fine—that Worf caught Danar or, at the very least, that Danar was no longer a threat, since everyone in sickbay seemed fairly calm.

But that left her with her own thoughts, which were primarily of Kieran. I’ve been an idiot, she realized. Not that this was a huge revelation—she’d been an idiot in some manner or other for most of the last year—but that didn’t make it any less so. She’d been making excuses for not pursuing a relationship with

Kieran, all of which sounded very reasonable when she'd spelled them out at the corner office, and which sounded completely ridiculous in light of what just happened. What if the Borg come to the Alpha Quadrant? What if the next time we're in the Romulan Neutral Zone, the captain doesn't have two Klingon ships up his sleeve? What if one of those weird anomalies we come across blows us to bits? What if the next computer virus sends us the way of the Yamato?

Dr. Crusher finished with Koji and walked over to check on Sonya. A smile on her pretty pale face, she went over Sonya with her scanner. "You're looking more awake, Ensign. How do you feel?"

"Nauseous, and my head hurts."

"Perfectly normal." She pulled a hypo out of her blue lab coat pocket and applied it to Sonya's neck. Almost immediately, her head cleared and her stomach felt like a stomach again instead of a whirligig. "That'll mask the symptoms until the concussion subsides. I wouldn't recommend returning to duty until your next shift starts—which, according to the duty roster, isn't for another twenty hours."

Sonya blinked in surprise. It had only been four hours since she'd gone on duty and GQ was sounded. "Thank you, Doctor. Uh, Doctor?"

"Yes?"

"What happened?"

Crusher chuckled. "Sorry, I guess you couldn't have known. Damar managed to escape. Nobody was killed, thankfully. Worf got a few bruises, Lieutenants Meyers and Costa also got concussions, Ensign Oliver broke his arm, and Lieutenant Duffy cracked a rib. Everyone else was just stunned a bit."

Sonya felt a profound sense of relief at the fact that Kieran was okay.

"Now get some rest—doctor's orders."

Smiling, Sonya lazily raised her right arm in salute. "Yes, sir."

She let herself drift off to sleep thinking that she needed to talk to Keiko Ishikawa.

The pleasant scent of wild roses from Earth, toyar from Betazed, and fire flowers from Berengaria wafted in the carefully circulated air of the Enterprise's arboretum on deck seventeen. Sonya stood in the middle of the tree nursery—the flowers in question were in the main part of the arboretum—knowing that what she was doing was crazy.

She had talked with Keiko, who had assured her that she would keep the tree nursery clear from 1900 onward. Keiko had a twinkle in her eye, adding, "It's about time you two got your act together." But then, Keiko had recently started seeing Chief O'Brien, so she had such things on her mind anyhow. In fact, Keiko's recent romantic bent had been one of the deciding factors in her choosing the arboretum as the site for her and Kieran's rendezvous.

"Rendezvous," listen to me. Bad enough I lied to Kieran to get him here, telling him there was a symposium. I guess I just wanted to hedge in case he said no, or wasn't interested. Sonya hadn't been on a date since she was a young teenager; she'd been too busy pushing herself to the next level, whether it

was school, the Academy, or the Enterprise. By deceiving Kieran, it gave him an easy out, in case she'd totally made atarg's ear out of the whole thing.

She was dressed in civilian clothes—a loose brown blouse and equally loose pants of the same color over black boots. It was, as far as she could remember, the first time she'd worn anything other than her uniform when not in her cabin. Lian had joked that she needn't have bothered packing clothes when she'd come on board. But it wasn't right to show up for a date in uniform.

At a little after 1900—being on time had never been Kieran's strong suit—she went out to stand near the aft door. A few minutes later, Kieran walked up to her. He was wearing a dark blue short-sleeved shirt with a yellow jacket over it, his pants the same color as the jacket. At first she winced, until she realized that the color perfectly matched the toyar, which were in full bloom, and which Keiko had made the centerpiece of the arboretum. That didn't make the outfit any more palatable, but Sonya resolved to live with it for as long as the clothes remained on.

She found herself hoping that wouldn't be too terribly long.

He offered her his arm, which she took with a smile, and they both entered the aft door.

"I guess we're the first ones here," he said as the door closed behind them with a soft swish.

The smile growing, Sonya reached up and gently turned and lowered Kieran's chin toward her. His brown eyes were filled with surprise, anticipation, and confusion, all at the same time. She whispered, "Kieran, there's no symposium."

Her hand moved up to his cheek and she craned her neck to kiss him full on the lips. To her great relief, he returned the kiss, though it took him until after she'd grabbed the back of his head to pull him closer that he thought to put his arms around her.

## CHAPTER

# 8

Captain's log, stardate 43992.6. Admiral Hanson and Lieutenant Commander Shelby of Starfleet Tactical have arrived to review the disappearance of the New Providence colony. No sign remains of the nine hundred inhabitants.

They were the best months of Sonya's life.

Geordi wasted very little time in putting them on separate shifts. He had no problem with fraternization in theory, but he also wanted his people focused on their work, not on each other. So Sonya was put in charge of gamma shift, which was a promotion of sorts, since she was responsible for the entire engineering section during the "night" hours. Kieran, meanwhile, worked alpha with Geordi.

The relationship seemed to do them both good. Kieran received more commendations, and he said he was taking the initiative more. As for Sonya, gamma shift seemed to respond well to her leadership skills, which amazed her, as she hadn't been aware she had any leadership skills. In fact, Commander Kurn, of all people—a Klingon who'd temporarily taken over as first officer as part of an exchange program—had given her a satisfactory rating for her work on gamma shift, notable for it being the only satisfactory rating he gave to anyone.

Working on alpha, Kieran tended to have the best stories, from him and Chief O'Brien unwittingly contaminating the ship with invidium—which led to Kieran being teased almost as much as Sonya had been after the hot-chocolate incident—to preparing a meeting room for the Legaran negotiation.

Not that it was all fun. Bernie Kornblum had been killed, shot by an Ansata terrorist who was attempting to blow up the ship, and everyone had believed Data to be dead as well, though that turned out to be a ruse. Several people had also been injured in an attack by a Romulan vessel during the encounter with “Tin Man.”

Still, things were going very well. The Enterprise did a lengthy survey of the Zeta Gellis Cluster, which included a rather bizarre first contact. Geordi started dating Christy Henshaw, which benefited the entire engineering staff, as it meant their boss was in a perpetual good mood. Kieran had joined the corner office, replacing Lian, who'd been transferred to the Hood, where she'd be the beta-shift ops officer under Riker's former CO, Captain DeSoto. Wes had been given a commission to ensign, complete with red uniform and pip, an action that pleased everyone except Tess Allenby.

All was well on the Starship Enterprise .

And then the Borg returned.

It started with the New Providence colony on Juret IV, which had been destroyed in a manner similar to that of the planets the Enterprise scanned in system J25 in the Delta Quadrant. A Borg expert named Elizabeth Shelby had been detached to the Enterprise to verify the likelihood that the Borg were responsible, which she did in short order.

Sonya hadn't been able to sleep the night before. Kieran, of course, slept like a rock. He'd been on board when they'd last encountered the Borg, but for him, it was just one more mission.

For Sonya, it had been a lot more.

When she came on for gamma shift, Geordi, Wes, Data, Marguerite Sherman, and Bigay Ampalayon were all standing around the main console, along with a blonde wearing a red lieutenant commander's uniform. Sonya assumed this to be the infamous Shelby.

“Look at Commander Borg go,” Helga Van Mayter muttered when Sonya walked past her.

“Commander Borg?” Sonya said with a smile.

“Well, she's supposed to be the expert. Never mind that we're the only ones who actually saw the damn things, but hey, she's the expert. You know, she beamed down early with Data? I heard Riker chewed her aft shields after that one—especially after she cleaned him out in poker.”

“She cleaned out Riker?”

Helga nodded.

Several hours into gamma, Riker came by asking for a report. “Everybody's up late tonight,” Helga muttered.

“Can you blame them?” Sonya asked.



“Not really. God, I hope they’re wrong.”

“Yeah.”

“Commander, I think we should call it a night.” Riker’s voice carried across engineering. Sonya looked over to see that Riker, who had been sitting on the console’s edge in front of Bigay and Marguerite, was now standing. “That’s an order. We’ll reconvene at 0500.”

Four whole hours of sleep, Sonya thought, then realized she was being unfair. Besides, Geordi and Wes were the types to keep gnawing at a problem until they’d completely chewed it, and Data never slept anyhow.

Shelby then said, “Sir, if I may be allowed to continue with Mr. Data, who does not require rest—”

“You need rest, Commander,” Riker said.

For anybody else that would’ve been it. In fact, if Shelby had really gotten the reaming Helga had described, she shouldn’t have even gone that far.

Instead, she went further: “If we have a confrontation with the Borg without improving our defense systems—”

“If we have a confrontation,” Riker said firmly, “I don’t want a crew fighting the Borg at the same time they’re fighting their own fatigue. Dismissed.”

With that, Shelby left, quickly followed by the others. Geordi gave Sonya a nod, which she returned.

Hours later, at 0415, Geordi came running into engineering. His uniform was rumpled, as if he’d slept in it, and hadn’t bothered to change into a new one. All things considered, Sonya figured that to be precisely the case.

“Geordi?” Sonya said quizzically.

“I got an idea while I was sleeping. Something I read about shield nutation modification.”

Sonya frowned. “You mean the talk T’Dar gave at the FES?”

Snapping his fingers, Geordi said, “Yes! That’s the one. If we modify the shield nutation, we might be able to hold off the Borg attack.”

Sonya thought over what the Vulcan scientist said at the Federation Engineering Symposium. “T’Dar’s hypothesis was that the emitters would have to be realigned.” She shook her head. “Geordi, that’d take days.”

“We probably don’t have days.” Geordi let out a long breath. “Okay, start on it, at least. At this point, every little bit’ll hel—”

Suddenly, without being entirely sure why, Sonya said, “The Klingons!”

Geordi gave her what might have been a penetrating gaze if his eyes were actually visible. “I’m sorry?”

Then it all came back to her, leaping forward from her subconscious, which had made her utter the phrase in the first place. “I just read a monograph last week by a Klingon engineer named Kurak—something about altering shield configuration. JAWM translated it and ran it. Computer, call up monograph from the most recent Journal of Applied Warp Mechanics by Kurak, daughter of Haleka.”

The screen in front of Sonya and Geordi lit up with the text from the journal. She started scanning it. “There we go.” She highlighted a paragraph and enlarged it.

Geordi read it over, seeing that it was a program for remodulating shields that would not require realigning the emitters. The intent was to be able to modify shields in battle. “This’ll work—we’re not reconfiguring, we’re remodulating, but the theory should still apply.” Grinning, Geordi gave Sonya a pat on the arm. “Nice work, Sonya.”

Beaming, Sonya said, “Thank you, sir.”

“You and Van Mayter get on this right away. And then, when gamma’s over, you all go to bed.”

Sonya hesitated. “But if we’re not finished—”

“Give it to Duffy and Barclay. What Commander Riker said to Shelby applies to you, too.” Sonya was about to object, pointing out that she hadn’t been able to sleep in any case, when Geordi said, “Trust me, we’ll come across the Borg soon enough, and when we do, I’m gonna be asking two hundred percent from everyone. Until then, though, I want you all rested. That’s an order, Lieutenant.”

Those last four words were said in as formal a tone as Geordi La Forge ever used. Straightening, Sonya said, “Yes, sir, Commander.”

Geordi relaxed again. “All right. I’m gonna see what we can do about phasers. Higher EM frequencies might mess up their subspace fie—”

“Commander La Forge, report to observation lounge.” That was Riker.

Tapping his combadge, Geordi said, “On my way, Commander.” He looked at Sonya. “Get to work, then get some sleep.”

Sonya nodded.

“Sealing doors to core chamber. Warning: inner hull failure. Decompression danger, deck thirty-six, section four. Sealing main engineering.”

The computer’s announcement sent Sonya rocketing awake from a fitful sleep.

Kieran!

She leapt out of bed, still in full uniform, having feared that this very thing might happen while she slept, and not wanting to waste any time getting on duty where she was needed.

As she entered the turbolift, her combadge chirped. “La Forge to all off-shift engineering personnel, report to Lieutenant Duffy on deck thirty-six. I’ll be on the bridge.”

Relief washed over Sonya at the news that Kieran was okay. Maybe they were lucky and they were able to evacuate before engineering was sealed off.

Kieran was waiting when she arrived at the main engineering console. The core chamber was behind a blast door. Also present were about a dozen engineers, plus some people from security. Sonya tried not to think about who she didn't see: Alfredo Della Guardia, Denny Russell, Bigay Ampalayon, Beth Bracken, Cliff Meyers...

When everyone arrived, Kieran—sounding more grave than Sonya'd ever heard him speak—said, “The Borg cut into the deck, causing a hull breach. Nineteen people were unable to get out of the area, of which we've scanned eleven outside the hull.”

“Lieu—lieutenant?” That was Reg Barclay, who was standing over the navigation display. “We're—we're moving. According to—to this readout, we're headed for the Paulsen Nebula.”

“Captain's probably hoping to lose 'em in there,” one of the security guards said.

“All right,” Kieran said, “let's get to work. We need to seal the breach and get this damn blast door back up.”

They were the worst days of Sonya Gomez's life.

The loss of Denny Russell had hit her the hardest. They'd been classmates at the Academy, after all. His deadpan calm had always been a welcome contrast to Sonya's nervous enthusiasm.

But all of them were devastating losses to the Enterprise. The eight whose bodies hadn't been scanned were found wedged into odd parts of engineering after they sealed the breach. It hadn't been easy—working in a nebula with the Borg searching for you made for difficult and tense work—but they did it. Nine of the nineteen were the security guards assigned to engineering when the ship was at red alert, who would not have left until all the engineers were out. The ten engineers' names were imprinted on Sonya's brain from seeing it on a display: AMPALAYON, BRACKEN, BRUNER, DELLAGUARDIA, EL'SRYK, FRIEDEL, MEYERS, RUSSELL, T'LOTA, ZELENETSKY.

As soon as engineering was back online, Geordi came back along with Data and Wes, and shared with the others the plan to modify the deflector dish to emit a high-EM phaser blast big enough to take out the Borg cube. What was left of all three shifts of engineering was tasked with this, and some people from security were brought in to assist.

Still, the names flashed in Sonya's vision, but she refused to let it get to her, not when they were forced to leave the nebula, not when the Borg subsequently attacked them, not when the Borg kidnapped the captain, and not when the Borg cube broke off and made a beeline for Earth.

We'll have time to grieve later.

Shelby had taken a team over to the Borg cube to get it out of warp drive, and possibly rescue Picard. Once they were at impulse, the ship's warp power had to be transferred to the deflector so they could use the weapon. Sonya was standing at the warp core, her hand hovering over the control that would execute the program she and Reg Barclay had hastily written to perform the transfer. For now, they were

pounding away at warp nine-point-six just to keep up. In less than an hour, they'd have to shut down the warp engines anyhow, just to keep the structural integrity field from failing. As it was, Kieran was standing over the SIF readout with the same nervous tension that Sonya hovered over her console, keeping an eye on it to make sure it didn't break down sooner.

Then the Borg ship went out of warp. Wes took the ship to impulse, and as soon as the warp engines stopped, Sonya ran the program. "Power being diverted to the deflector."

Kieran smiled grimly. "SIF reading nominal."

From the tactical systems station, Marguerite Sherman said, "Deflector at seventy percent power and rising."

A feed was coming in from the bridge. Sonya had been barely paying attention to it until the away team reported back. What caught her ear were Worf's words, in reference to the captain, whom they did not rescue: "He isa Borg."

Oh my God.

Reg shot a nervous look at Sonya. "He—he is a Borg? What does—what does that mean?"

Sonya shook her head. "I wish I knew." She shuddered. "No, I take it back, I don't wish I knew. Not even a little."

Riker was arguing with Shelby and Crusher about getting the captain back versus firing the weapon—with Riker on the side of firing the weapon—when the Borg hailed the ship.

The voice technically belonged to that of Jean-Luc Picard. It was the voice that Sonya still heard in bad dreams about hot chocolate saying, "Yes, Ensign, it's all over me." But now, the voice that had distressed her a year and a half ago was a dull, mechanized monotone.

"I am Locutus of Borg. Resistance is futile. Your life as it has been is over. From this time forward, you will service us."

Riker's voice followed. "Mr. Worf—fire."

Marguerite said, "Power's building. Energy discharge in six seconds."

Everyone in engineering moved to stand behind Marguerite to see the weapon that would devastate the Borg.

The energy beam hit the Borg cube.

And had no effect.

"No," Sonya muttered.

From the bridge, Worf confirmed: "The Borg ship is undamaged."

"It can't be." That sounded like Shelby.

“We’re losing the coolant!” Reg said.

That was followed by the computer’s confirmation, which was scarier in its matter-of-factness than Reg’s hysterical ranting. “Warning: Warp reactor core primary coolant failure. Warning: Exceeding reactor chamber thermal limits.”

Marguerite said, “Warp engines shutting down—weapon powering down,” which matched what they were saying on the bridge.

“They couldn’t have adapted that quickly,” Riker said.

“The knowledge and experience of the human Picard is part of us now. It has prepared us for all possible courses of action. Your resistance is hopeless, Number One.”

Hearing Locutus’s dry, mechanical tones speak with Picard’s voice chilled Sonya to her toes. We’re dead.

Kieran said quietly, “The Borg ship’s leaving.”

Or not. Sonya wasn’t sure why the Borg didn’t finish them off, but gift horses had bad breath, as her sister always said. “All right, we need to get warp drive, deflectors, and shields back online. Let’s move it, people.”

Later on, when she would tell people about it, they would say it was anticlimactic. Sonya thought that was insane, and said so. They chased the Borg—who plowed through a Starfleet armada at Wolf 359—to Earth, managing to bring Picard back home along the way. Or, rather, Locutus, as the captain was still a Borg drone. But Data was able to use Locutus—with some subconscious help from Picard himself—to put the Borg to sleep. The cube exploded over Earth shortly after that.

The first person to give the anticlimactic declaration was Belinda, whose face on the comm screen looked disappointed. “That’s the best you guys could do.”

“I’m not about to argue with the results, Bee.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re home, at least, mija. You gonna come down and see us?”

Evasively, Sonya said, “I don’t know. . . depends on the repair schedule.” Belinda’s soccer career had come to an end due to a knee injury, and she was back living with Mami and Papi—which, unfortunately, was tense for everyone, as Mami was not pleased that her eldest daughter had come home. Sonya really didn’t want to face the familial strife after barely surviving the Borg.

“How’s that boyfriend of yours?”

She broke into a huge smile. “He’s wonderful. It’s been great—we just get along so well. We can talk about anything, really.”

“But you just talk about engines, right?”

Sonya was about to tartly answer in the negative, until she thought about it, and realized that she and

Kieran did talk about work a lot. Then she remembered their last date before the Borg mess. “No, that’s not all we talk about. I loaned him my Brautigan book.”

Belinda’s eyes went wide. “The one Papigave you? Wow, this mustbe true love.”

When she turned fifteen, Sonya’s father had given her a twenty-first-century leather-bound edition of *The Complete Works of Richard Brautigan*, which had become her favorite book. She had told Kieran about it, and he asked to borrow it, see what all the fuss was about, especially since he’d never heard of Brautigan.

“So how’s he like the book?”

“Don’t know, he hasn’t read it yet. Anyhow, things are going great with Kieran.”

“Glad to hear it, Ess. Looks like you’re doing well on that luxury liner.”

“It’snot a luxury liner!” Sonya said defensively, and proceeded to give a lecture to a laughing Belinda about the state-of-the-art nature of the *Galaxy* -class vessel.

Eventually, they finished, and Sonya signed off, giving another evasive answer about whether she’d be able to get down to Vieques to visit the family. Then she went down to engineering, since her shift was about to start.

She came across Kieran in the corridor. “I can’t win,” he said without preamble.

“What is it?”

“I’m finally back on Earth for the first time in years, so I figure, great, I can drop in on Mom and Amy, see how they’re doing. There’s only one problem.”

Smiling impishly, Sonya said, “They’re on vacation on Betazed?”

“They’re on vacation on Betazed. I completely forgot about that.”

Kieran had told her about the vacation his mother and sister were taking two months ago. Somehow, Sonya couldn’t bring herself to be surprised that she remembered that and Kieran didn’t.

“So now I’ve got nowhere to go, unless you have a better offer?” Kieran waggled his eyebrows.

“Honestly, I don’t,” Sonya said quickly, trying to ignore the pit that opened in her stomach just then. “Belinda and Mami are at battle stations, and—”

Kieran held up a hand. “Say no more.” He’d heard her stories about the on-again-off-again war between Guadalupe Gomez and her oldest daughter, and therefore knew that when it was on again, it was best to be elsewhere. “Tell you what. I suggest that we suck up mercilessly to Geordi and volunteer to stay on board during the repair cycle.”

Sonya grinned. “Suits me fine.”

Turning around, Kieran joined her in walking back to engineering, where they found Geordi talking to someone on a comm screen. They waited patiently until he was done, and when he turned around, Sonya

saw a look he hadn't had on his face since their trip to Starbase Montgomery a year and a half ago, which was also the last time engineers who didn't report to Geordi got their hands on his engines.

Seeing the two of them, Geordi quickly put on a happier face. "What can I do for the two of you?"

"Sir," Sonya said, "we'd like to volunteer to stay on board during the repairs—help you keep an eye on McKinley's people."

Kieran grinned. "Make sure they don't turn the warp core upside down or anything."

All the tension seemed to leave Geordi's body. "You don't know how glad I am to hear you two say that. I didn't wanna ask anyone else to stay behind, but if you're volunteering—"

"Absolutely, sir," Kieran said.

"Thank you. I won't forget this."

"Just name your firstborn after us, sir," Kieran deadpanned.

Geordi chuckled, and walked over to the warp core.

Sonya stared up at him incredulously. "Are you nuts? Sonya Kieran La Forge would make a terrible name."

They laughed together, kissed quickly, and then Kieran headed off to his quarters while Sonya went on duty for the last formal shift before the repair cycle began.

## CHAPTER

# 9

Captain's log, stardate 45130.1. We have turned Dr. Kila Marr over to the authorities on Starbase 413, following her unauthorized destruction of the crystalline entity. We are now proceeding to Mudor V.

"Sonya, good, I need you to—"

Before Geordi, who had just arrived from the bridge, could finish his sentence, Sonya said, "I've realigned the warp coils and run a level-two on the deuterium injectors. They looked a little spotty."

Geordi stopped in his tracks and shook his head. "I was just going to mention the warp coils. What was wrong with the injectors?"

Sonya shrugged. "Nothing major, just a point-one reduction in the flow. I figured it was best to check. The diagnostic'll be finished in half an hour."

"Great." Geordi grinned. "You're gonna work me out of a job, Lieutenant."

Again, she shrugged. "Just doing my job, Commander." Not that it's much of a challenge. She wasn't so impolitic as to say that out loud, of course. "Of course," right. Two and a half years ago, I would've blurted that out, along with fifteen other stupid things.

But that was when she had reported on board. She had slowed down, and she'd learned not to babble—at least not so much.

More to the point, though, she had learned the Enterprise —inside and out. She knew every trick of the warp drive, she knew every plasma conduit, every injector, every ODN conduit, every isolinear chip in the engine room, if not the entire vessel.

There's nothing left to learn.

That wasn't entirely fair. The ship had its share of surprises, from the faulty replacement piece from McKinley that caused a warp-core breach—and, indirectly, a witch-hunt on the Enterprise, before Picard put a stop to it—to Wesley's experiment that trapped his mother in a warp bubble.

Wesley was gone now, finally having enrolled in the Academy, which had disappointed Sonya, but had thrilled Tess Allenby, who had taken over at conn on alpha shift, only to transfer to the Lexington shortly thereafter, along with Gar Costa. The corner office had been reduced to herself, Kieran, and Helga, and had left the latter feeling like a third wheel.

And then Helga had died rather brutally during the Enterprise's encounter with some odd dark matter that had been phasing parts of the ship out of existence for brief seconds. The floor under Helga Van Mayter had done that, and rematerialized while she was in the middle of falling through it. It was one of the most grisly deaths Sonya had ever encountered, and it still gave her nightmares, which usually ended with her screaming and Kieran comforting her.

With Tess, Lian, Wesley, and Gar gone, and Helga and Denny dead, Sonya found that she didn't really have anyone left on board to talk to except for Geordi and Kieran. There were lots of new faces, including Martin Kopf and Robin Lefler, both recent Academy graduates who were thrilled to be assigned to the flagship. Sonya recognized their excitement from a distance, as she realized with a start that she no longer felt it. Indeed, she'd found herself avoiding Kopf and Lefler because they reminded her too much of how she used to be.

The shift went uneventfully—a welcome respite after the tumult of their disastrous mission to the Melona IV colony and subsequent pursuit of the crystalline entity responsible for the planet's destruction—and Sonya went back to her cabin, asking the computer for messages. She barely registered the usual litany of journals, personal messages from Mami and Papi, and various duty-related queries, but was shocked to hear the computer conclude the list with: “A communiqué from Captain Schönhertz of the U.S.S. Oberth.”

Sonya blinked. I didn't know the captain got the Oberth. Her old professor had always sworn she'd never take starship duty again, and Sonya wondered what had changed her mind.

“Computer, play comm from Captain Schönhertz.”

The round face and thick, curly blond hair of Katrine Schönhertz appeared on the small comm screen on her desk. “Hello, Sonya. I hope this message finds you well. I've been hearing good things about the work you've been doing on Enterprise. You're probably wondering why I'm calling from a ship, since I said I'd never take starship duty again if my life depended on it. Well, my life doesn't depend on it, but I got an offer I really couldn't refuse. It's a one-year project that will be studying some new ways of dealing with antimatter. We've got one slot left on the team, and I brought up your name. I've appended the missions specs to this message. This position is for a full-grade lieutenant who knows her way around an antimatter injector, so you fit the bill nicely—or, rather, you will shortly.” Schönhertz's eyes suddenly



went wide, and she said, “Okay, I wasn’t supposed to tell you about your impending promotion, but your CO’ll probably be giving you the good news in a day or two.”

She barely listened to the rest of the message. I’m getting promoted! She was thrilled to see that her hard work had paid off and that she’d be advancing—

—to another position on the Enterprise that wasn’t likely to be qualitatively different from the one she had now.

Worse, even the vessel’s missions had become mundane. No, that’s not fair —nothing that happens on this ship can possibly qualify as mundane. But her complaint to Geordi that she wanted to be there when the Enterprise came across what was out there was now three years old, and after two Borg attacks, getting involved in a Klingon civil war, playing host to everyone from primitive colonists to Vulcan diplomats to transcendent aliens to Acamarian thugs to Counselor Troi’s insane mother, encounters with Shelliak, Romulans, Ansata terrorists, Gomtuu, Tallarians, two-dimensional creatures, and more spatial anomalies than she could shake a stick at, not to mention regular visits from Q, Sonya began to grow weary of it. Too many of those missions had body counts attached to them.

Besides, she had her career to think of. Where could she go from here? Geordi wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon, and that pretty much cut off her only real avenue of advancement. If she was going to be a chief engineer, which was something she truly wanted, it wasn’t going to happen here unless something happened to Geordi, and that didn’t bear thinking about.

And then there’s Kieran. With a shock she realized that she hadn’t even thought about him until now, which was horribly unfair, as Kieran had become very important to her. Indeed, he was pretty much the only thing tying her to the Enterprise right now.

That’s not enough. It was a thought that left her sad. But she had worked too hard to become the best Starfleet officer she could. For three years, that meant learning the ropes on the flagship. Now, though, the best thing she could do for her career was move on.

Schönhertz had said there was only one position, so Kieran couldn’t come with her. Besides which, Kieran had already made it clear on numerous occasions that he had very little ambition within Starfleet, which jibed with his slow promotion track. He’d be lucky to make lieutenant commander by the time he was forty. And he’d also said numerous times that he had no interest in leaving the Enterprise .

Of course, that was before we started dating.

Taking the transfer would mean breaking up with Kieran. Or at least separating from him.

No, breaking up. She could barely keep up with duty and a relationship with somebody she served with. Subspace relationships were never, in Sonya’s experience, successful. The only ones she’d seen work were people who were already married or otherwise committed before the separation, and she and Kieran weren’t anywhere near that level yet.

I have to tell him, she thought, and only then realized that she had already mentally packed her bags for the Oberth .

CHAPTER

**10**

Captain's log, stardate 45156.1. Our mission to Mudor V has been completed, and since our next assignment will not begin for several days, we're enjoying a welcome respite from our duties.

You've got to tell him.

Sonya had been saying this to herself for days, ever since she and Kieran both got their formal promotions to full-grade lieutenant at the beginning of the Mudor V mission. They were now holding station for a few days, and Geordi had given both his new full lieutenants "a few days off before I drop your new duties on you." At present they were in civilian clothes, headed for the arboretum. Keiko was nine months pregnant with her and Chief O'Brien's child, and several officers had volunteered to do some occasional gardening duty to take a load off the botanist.

The vagueness of Geordi's phrasing regarding new duties had been at Sonya's request. She wanted to be the one to break the news to Kieran that she was transferring to the Oberth.

"So I'm assuming we're gonna have to weed the famtils again," Kieran said cheerfully.

"Probably," Sonya muttered.

"Sonnie, is something wrong?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing."

Kieran stood up straight and said in stentorian tones, "The sound you have just heard is a lie." Back to his normal voice: "C'mon, what's bothering you?"

Before Sonya could even come up with an evasive answer—all the while admonishing herself for not giving him the straight answer he deserved—the ship started shaking. Lights flickered on and off, and the ship continued to buck and weave. "What the hell—?" Kieran said before he was knocked to the floor. Sonya was gripping the door frame of one of the labs they were passing en route to the arboretum.

Finally, the shaking stopped, though the red alert siren was still blaring, and emergency lights were all that illuminated the corridor.

Kieran looked up at Sonya from his prone position on the deck. "I ask again, what the hell?"

"Dunno," Sonya said. "We must have hit something very hard." She tapped her combadge. It was the start of beta shift, and Geordi had left a skeleton crew in engineering, with Lieutenant Alekala in charge of the five people on shift. "Gomez to engineering. Chao-Anh, what's—"

"I can't talk, Sonya. Come on, everyone, get out now!" Behind Chao-Anh, Sonya could hear the four-note chime that meant a bulkhead was dropping. There must have been a core breach or a hull breach.

"All decks, brace for impact!" That was Lieutenant Monroe, who was in charge of the bridge during this light shift.

Kieran had gotten to his feet. "What, another one?"

The words had barely escaped his mouth when the ship rocked again, sending them both to the deck.

Sonya's ears were then assaulted by an explosion, as the door to one of the labs down the hall exploded. She recalled that Lieutenant T'Proll was supervising an experiment with quaratum. Several containers of the stuff were in the cargo bay right now, more than they needed for their current allotment of thrusters, for T'Proll's project.

Sonya had a bad feeling that it was the quaratum that exploded, and the only way for that to happen was if there were lethal radiation levels in the lab, which, thanks to the blown door, would be in the corridor in a minute.

As one, Sonya and Kieran moved to drop the emergency bulkhead. Kieran got there a moment sooner, and gave her a goofy grin as he pulled the lever that lowered the duranium door from the ceiling.

While Kieran did that, Sonya tapped her combadge again. "Gomez to engineering." Her combadge gave a low trill indicating that it wasn't functioning. Walking over to the bulkhead, she touched the computer screen, but it didn't respond. "Great, comm's down, and power's down." She looked at Kieran. "I don't suppose you're hiding a tricorder in your pants?"

"If I said I was just glad to see you, would you hit me?"

"I'd certainly consider it."

"Then I'll just say, no, I don't."

Sonya glanced down the corridor away from the emergency bulkhead they'd just dropped. "Come on, we need to get to engineering, see if Chao-Anh needs help."

Kieran nodded and followed her, only to find that another emergency bulkhead had been dropped. Looking up and down the bulkhead, as if it would provide answers, Kieran finally said, "You know, I don't think I want to know why that thing was dropped. I just hope it wasn't because of something on this side of it."

"Yeah." Sonya looked up. "Maybe we can use the crawlways."

"For what, exactly?"

"To get to engineering."

"Sonnie, we don't know how bad the radiation is up there. And we don't know—"

"We don't know anything," Sonya snapped. She sighed. "Sorry, but we can't just stand here and hope somebody rescues us. The ship is obviously in big trouble, and we have to help. We're closer to engineering than the bridge anyhow, so let's get down there and see if there's anything we can do."

After considering the point, Kieran nodded. "Yeah, you're right. I just hate crawling around in there, y'know?"

Sonya couldn't help but smile. "Mr. Gravity Boots can't handle confinement?"

"I'm a creature of the air. That's why I like to stay in the nice, big, spacious engine room."

Sonya and Kieran crawled for the better part of an hour, and only made about ten meters' worth of real progress. They were constantly doubling back, going around, and avoiding various obstacles in their path, most of which were due to yet another catastrophic malfunction. While it was possible for a ship like the Enterprise to have one or two malfunctions like this, it was almost impossible for so many systems to completely fall apart at once.

"We must have hit a quantum filament," Sonya said when they took a brief rest at one junction, sitting across from each other in what passed for a wide space in the crawlways.

"That's crazy. The bridge would've seen it coming."

"Only if they were looking for it, and why would they be? You know how wide those things aren't," she said with a grin.

"Nah, I'm thinking Romulan attack. Or maybe a new Borg weapon."

Sonya shook her head. "The damage was too catastrophic, too across-the-board. Weapons fire wouldn't do that—or if it did, it'd be enough to crack the ship in half, and we'd have felt it if that happened."

"I don't know, Sonnie—"

"Kieran, remember when we first met?"

Cutting himself off, Kieran blinked. "Yeah, but I don't see—"

"You told me that it was a design flaw, I said it was a tribblecom. Who was right?"

"Oh, that first meeting."

It was Sonya's turn to blink. "What other first meeting was there?"

"Okay, I was thinking of the day you came on board and I passed you and Denny in the corridor on the way to a staff meeting."

"We didn't really meet, though," Sonya said with a smile.

"We exchanged words. I said I was running late for a staff meeting."

Sonya honestly didn't remember the conversation that clearly—that day was a haze of nervousness and anticipation and her inability to give The Speech to Geordi—but decided not to let him know that.

He's going to be disappointed enough when I tell him what I have to tell him.

Slapping his knees, Kieran made as if to rise. "Shall we boogie?"

"Kieran, I'm leaving the Enterprise."

"What?"

“I’m leaving theEnterprise . There’s a position on theOberth open—a one-year mission dealing with new ways to harness antimatter, under Captain Schönhertz. I’m taking it.”

Sitting all the way back down, Kieran said, “Oh.”

“I’m sorry, I wanted to tell you sooner, but I didn’t know how.”

“Did okay just then,” he muttered.

“It’s a great opportunity, and—”

“Yeah, it is, and you’d be stupid not to take it.”

Her mouth hanging open for a moment, Sonya finally said, “Really?”

“Of course. Geez, Sonnie, I don’t expect you to be a slug like me for the rest of your career. I mean, yeah, you’re on theEnterprise now, but you’re one of dozens. That’s fine if you’re me and don’t want to stand out in a crowd, but on theOberth ? You’ll be sitting pretty. I bet you’ll be running the place inside a year.”

She smiled, relieved more than she could adequately express that Kieran understood. “I hope so, since it’s only a one-year project.”

Kieran laughed. Sonya had never been so glad to hear that wonderful sound as she was now.

“Come on,” he said, getting up for real this time. “We’ve got work to do.”

They arrived at a crawlway just above engineering on deck thirty-two, after three hours of crawling around, a journey that should have only taken one hour at the most. Yes, theEnterprise was large, but they had started out fairly deep in the saucer section. Unfortunately, the damage from what Sonya was morally certain was a quantum filament had been extensive. Many of the crawlways were cut off for one reason or another.

“Genry, we’ve crossed the ice!” Kieran said when they arrived over the corridor outside engineering.

Sonya looked at him with confusion.

“Sorry,” he said, “old book I read when I was a kid.The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula Le Guin. There’s this long journey, and at the end—”

Before Kieran could finish, he was interrupted by a tapping on the floor beneath them.

Kieran and Sonya exchanged glances, then shifted so they weren’t kneeling on the hatch. Sonya tried to open it, and saw that it was jammed. “Somebody must be stuck down there.”

“And me without my P-38—it’s in the same pants as my tricorder.”

Figuring she had nothing to lose, Sonya yelled. “Is somebody down there?”

A muffled voice said something, but she couldn't make it out.

“Lousy duranium—too soundproof,” Kieran muttered.

Sonya started looking around the crawlway. “There's got to be some way to open the hatch.”

Kieran reached into his pocket. “All I've got is this weed-whacker.”

Looking at the long, cylindrical item that was used to remove weeds at the root without overly disturbing the ground, Sonya started turning over possibilities in her mind. “What we need is a sonic enhancer.”

Frowning, Kieran said, “How would that—” Then he brightened. “Oh, right! Perfect! Except we don't have a sonic enhancer.” Then he grinned. “But we do have the Ellix bafflers. They're running along the ceiling there.”

Glancing up, Sonya grinned. Reaching up, she pried a panel loose, then looked at the components running through the wall. “Now that's ironic.”

“What is?”

She grinned and looked at Kieran. “We need the weed-whacker to pry the baffler out before we can modify it so that it will turn the whacker into a P-38.”

“Life's full of little ironies,” Kieran said as he handed over the weed-whacker. “We make a good team.”

Sonya found she had nothing to say to that.

Within two minutes, Sonya had gotten one of the bafflers out. Four minutes after that, they finished the modifications to the weed-whacker. Ten seconds after that, the hatch was open.

Six engineers stared up at Sonya and Kieran: Chao-Anh Aleakala, Robin Lefler, Martin Kopf, and the other three who were on duty with them, whose names Sonya was embarrassed to realize she didn't know.

It doesn't matter, she thought sadly. I'm leaving.

“I am so glad to see you two,” Chao-Anh said. “We're running out of air down here, and I don't know what's happening in engineering. We heard someone raise the blast door, but we can't get in there, and we couldn't get the damn hatch open.”

Kieran grinned. “Let's see what we can find out up here. Care to join us in Leg Cramp Central?”

A few hours later, it was over. Riker and Data—or, rather, Data's head, since his body had been electrocuted—got to engineering, and raised the blast door. The bridge had dumped power to a monitor down there so they could restore the antimatter containment field. Sonya had been rather nonplussed to see how close they had all come to blowing up, especially since—had Riker and Data not arrived when they did—the field would have collapsed when she and Kieran were still crawling around in the drive section. Everybody had a story to tell of what they were doing when the filament hit, from Troi taking command of the bridge after Monroe's death, to the captain being stuck in a turbolift with three children,

to Lieutenant Mahowiack riding herd on a group of teenagers who were suddenly trapped in a lightless, sealed-off holodeck. But the story on everyone's lips was the fact that Keiko gave birth to a baby girl—and Worf, of all people, was the midwife.

Soon enough, they were en route to Starbase 67. Geordi threw a party in Sonya's honor, at which the only drink available was hot chocolate. Sonya groaned, and so did everyone else when Captain Picard showed up to wish her well. He even gamely took a sip of hot chocolate, and left without a drop on his uniform, to Sonya's relief and everyone else's disappointment.

Upon arrival at the starbase, Sonya and Kieran said their good-byes in his cabin. Kieran had been very supportive—until today. His usual flippancy was muted; he kept putting off letting her leave until she had to force herself to return to her quarters so she could clear them out. When she went to the airlock to disembark, her hastily packed duffel bag over her shoulder, he was waiting for her.

“This is it, then?” he said. It was the same thing he'd said six times in his quarters.

“Kieran, please, I need to go. The Oberth is waiting for me.”

“I know. I didn't mean to hold you up, I just wanted to say good-bye.”

Sonya was going to say that they'd done that, but one look at his face made her realize how cruel that was. Kieran wasn't very good at saying good-bye. She thought it was in part due to his father dying while he was away at the Academy, though she figured that might have just been her own amateur diagnosis. Either way, she couldn't begrudge him getting one last farewell.

And she was going to miss him.

Kissing him gently on the cheek, she said in a quiet voice, “Take care of yourself, Kieran.”

With that, she walked past him, and went down the gangway, refusing to let herself turn around one last time. If she did, she wasn't sure she'd be able to resist his wide, pleading brown eyes.

## EPILOGUE

Captain's log, stardate 53122.9. Our new first officer, and the new head of the da Vinci's S.C.E. team, Commander Sonya Gomez, is reporting for duty today—and about damn time, too. With the Dominion War over, I'm looking forward to going back to less perilous missions like the one that claimed Commander Salek at Randall V. From everything I've heard, Salek's replacement should live up to her predecessor's high standards.

The ships just keep getting smaller, Sonya couldn't help but think.

Of course, when one's career begins on a Galaxy-class vessel, almost everything is a come-down in terms of size, but each subsequent vessel she'd served on, from the mid-size Oberth to the compact Sentinel, had been smaller than the last, and the Sabre-class da Vinci was the smallest of all of them.

She hadn't any intention of leaving the Sentinel, even with the promotion to commander, but she was also specifically requested by Captain David Gold of the da Vinci, based on recommendations from Admiral Ross's office that apparently included the kind words of the legendary Montgomery Scott. With that much brass behind it, Sonya could hardly turn the assignment down, especially since it meant supervising, not just an engine room, but a mobile Starfleet Corps of Engineers team that went out solving the galaxy's

problems. It was a great opportunity.

Gold had no engineering background of which Sonya was aware. However, he'd been in charge of the *da Vinci* for several years now, ever since its assignment to the S.C.E., after a well-regarded tour commanding the *Progress*. Besides, Sonya had spent all of her adult life among engineers, and that led her to the conclusion that the best people to supervise them weren't engineers.

The only fly in the ointment was when she looked at the crew roster and saw who her second in command would be, which was why she was thinking about the size of the ship and the history of her captain right now, as it was easier than thinking about her second officer.

Kieran.

When the gangway door at Starbase 96 slid open, there he was, standing in the *da Vinci* corridor. She hadn't lain eyes on him in eight years. He had gained some weight, and while his unkempt brown hair still covered his entire head, it had thinned a bit.

His amused brown eyes and easy smile hadn't changed. The latter widened when he saw her.

"Sonnie!" And without warning, he grabbed her into a massive bear hug.

Until this very second, Sonya had no idea how she was going to react to seeing Kieran again. To her relief, it was joy, and she returned the hug with almost as much enthusiasm. That big smile had been missing from her life, and she was so happy to have it back. "Kieran, it's so good to see you."

"Same here, Sonnie, same here."

They finally broke the embrace and stared at each other. Sonya found her eyes going to the gold collar under his black-and-gray uniform jacket. "Figures. You've only gone up one grade rank. You should have my job."

Kieran shuddered. "No chance. Don't want it. I prefer to have power without responsibility. Salek was great at that administrative stuff, and so're you. After all, you ran an engine room, and did a damn fine job, too. I heard about that trick you pulled with the warp field on the *Sentinel*."

Sonya found herself blushing. Altering the *Sentinel*'s warp field to make it seem like a Cardassian ship while they were stuck behind enemy lines was a trick and a half, especially coming after a prolonged fight with some Jem'Hadar ships, but it had gotten her a commendation. Captain Amalfitano had said it was at the top of the very long list of reasons why she got the promotion to commander.

"Anyway," he said as he led her down the corridor toward the turbolift, "you're gonna love it here. We've got a tac systems specialist who served on *DS9* with O'Brien, so we can trade chief stories. Oh, and we have two Bynar civilians to do the computer work."

That surprised Sonya, as she hadn't remembered seeing that on the crew roster. But if they were civilians, they wouldn't necessarily have been on that roster.

Kieran continued to babble on the way to the bridge. When the doors parted, Sonya found herself in a space that was smaller than the quarters she and Lian T'su shared on the *Enterprise* eleven years ago. A thin strip of deck ringed the bridge, lined with consoles, with a command well a step down that included conn, ops, and the command chair.



A white-haired, blue-eyed, pleasant-faced elderly human stepped up from the latter as Kieran spoke. “Captain David Gold, this is your new first officer, and the new head of the S.C.E. team, Commander Sonya Gomez.”

Sonya smiled and said, “Permission to come aboard, sir.”

“Granted.” Gold returned the smile. “Welcome aboard. I understand you and Duffy served together under Jean-Luc Picard on the Enterprise.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Sonya said. “Of course he knows. Kieran probably told him.”

“Good. I’ve known Picard since his Academy days, and he doesn’t turn out bad officers. It’ll be a pleasure to have you two working together.”

“I’m sure it will, sir.”

And Sonya found that she meant it. She wasn’t sure where her relationship with Kieran would go from here, or even if it would, given their positions in this ship’s hierarchy. Not to mention on a ship of this size. The population of the *Vinci* was four percent of that of the *Enterprise*—that would mean their lives were in a fishbowl. A relationship might not be the wisest move.

But that was for tomorrow. Today, she was on a new ship, looking forward to a wonderful new assignment, and she already knew that she could count on at least one member of her team.

I can’t wait to see what happens next.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As should be obvious, *Many Splendors* weaves in and out of several episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* during its second, third, fourth, and early fifth seasons. I would therefore like to first of all acknowledge the works of the following writers, whose dialogue was ruthlessly poached: Robin Bernheim (“The Hunted”), Maurice Hurley (“Q Who”), David Kemper (“Peak Performance”), David Mack (S.C.E.#24: *Wildfire* Book 2), Ronald D. Moore (“Disaster”), and Michael Piller (“The Best of Both Worlds Parts 1–2”).

In addition to the above-listed, the works of several screenwriters and eBook authors informed my writing: Hilary J. Bader (“The Loss”), Dennis Putman Bailey & David Bischoff (“Tin Man”), Peter S. Beagle (“Sarek”), Rick Berman (“Brothers”), Sally Caves (“Hollow Pursuits”), Lawrence V. Conley & Jeri Taylor (“Silicon Avatar”), Drew Deighan (“Sins of the Father”), Steve Gerber & Beth Woods (“Contagion”), Shari Goodhartz (“The Most Toys”), Maurice Hurley (“The Arsenal of Freedom”), Brian Alan Lane (“Elementary, Dear Data”), Philip LaZebnik (“Darmok”), William Leisner (S.C.E.#57: *Out of the Cocoon*), Robert Lewin (“The Arsenal of Freedom”), David Mack (S.C.E.#24: *Wildfire* Book 1), Richard Manning & Hans Beimler (“The Emissary”), Joe Menosky (“In Theory,” “Darmok”), Steve Mollman & Michael Schuster (S.C.E.#62: *The Future Begins*), Ronald D. Moore (“The Bonding,” “Sins of the Father,” “Family,” “In Theory”), W. Reed Moran (“Sins of the Father”), Aaron Rosenberg (S.C.E.#33: *Collective Hindsight* Book 1), Hannah Louise Shearer (“Pen Pals”), Dean Wesley Smith (S.C.E.#1: *The Belly of the Beast*), Melinda M. Snodgrass (“The Measure of a Man,” “Pen Pals,” “The High Ground”), and Dayton Ward & Kevin Dillmore (S.C.E.#4–5: *Interphase* Books 1–2). I also made use of my own past S.C.E. work (#2: *Fatal Error*, #10: *Here There Be Monsters*, #21: *War Stories* Book 1, and #28: *Breakdowns* in particular).

Finally major thanks to CGAG and The Mom, who made it all better.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KEITH R.A. DECANDIDO is the codeveloper of S.C.E., and has been the editor responsible for the series since 2001. He has also written or cowritten ten eBooks in the series, more than any other author (though Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore come close with nine). Besides Fatal Error, Cold Fusion, Here There Be Monsters, Breakdowns, Security, Many Splendors, and the two-parters Invincible and War Stories, Keith has also written almost a dozen novels, several short stories, two novellas, and one comic book miniseries in the world of Star Trek, spanning all five TV shows, as well as the novel-only series I.K.S. Gorkon, New Frontier, The Lost Era, and, of course, S.C.E. He's also written novels, short fiction, essays, nonfiction books, and more in the universes of World of Warcraft, StarCraft, Spider-Man, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Serenity, Farscape, Andromeda, Doctor Who, and much, much more. His next Trek work will arrive in 2007: The Mirror-Scaled Serpent, the Voyager portion of the Star Trek: Mirror Universe event; and Q&A, one of the post-Nemesis novels that will celebrate the twentieth anniversary of Star Trek: The Next Generation. He continues to be the editor in charge of the Star Trek eBook line, including the about-to-be-relaunched Corps of Engineers series, as well as the fortieth anniversary original Star Trek miniseries Mere Anarchy.

Keith lives in New York City with his girlfriend and two insane cats, where in what he jokingly calls his spare time, he plays percussion professionally, avidly follows his beloved New York Yankees, and practices kenshikai karate. Find out too little about Keith at his Web site at [www.DeCandido.net](http://www.DeCandido.net).