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S.C.E.

#66

***MANY SPLENDORS
WHAT'S PAST BOOK SIX***



Keith R.A. DeCandido

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(What's Past Book 6)

Keith R.A. DeCandido



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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 experimental 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 to 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 accurately 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 monumental 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 home, 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 T'su 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, the

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 the 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 I 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

enign 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. ““—with 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 2. Then 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 the ship. 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.

Captain's log, supplemental. As happened with our sister ship, the *Enterprise* beginning to experience a series of system failures. So far they are random, but I feel 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 system 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

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 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, 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 his 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 can’t 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 *that* 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 me 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 lost 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 get *her* 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 hand. “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—”

“I *knew* it!” Sonya said as she sat down. “I *told* 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 there 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 *Yama* 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 reads 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. When she had yet to be formally introduced to the android, she’d seen him in engineering a few times, and she 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 the *really* 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. S

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 specific 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 Iconia 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*.

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. Doctor 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~~ 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 Drenn 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 Dremora 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*

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 old 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 new changes for 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 the 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 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 a *lot*, 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.”

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