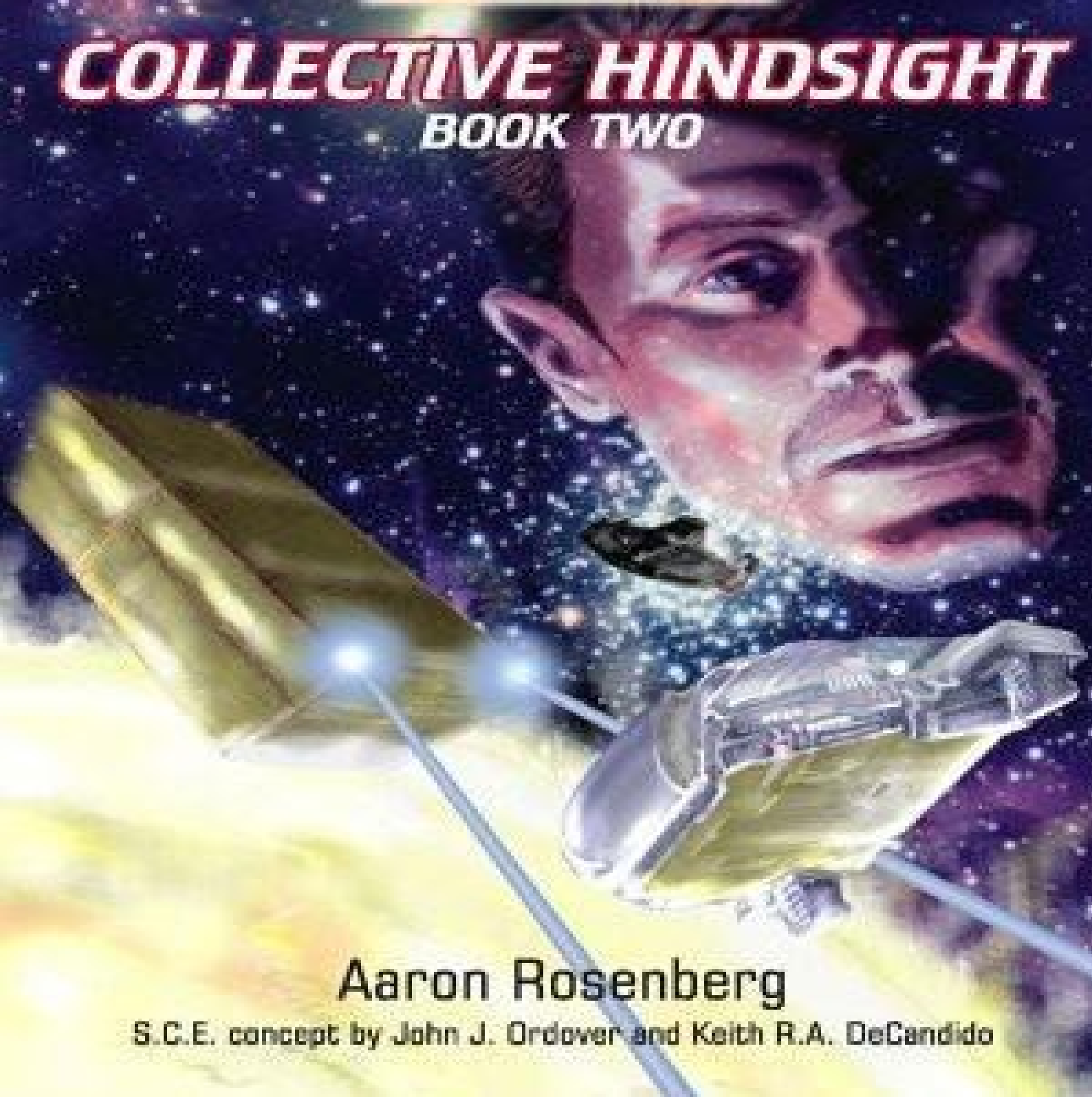


STAR TREK

S.C.E.

#34

COLLECTIVE HINDSIGHT BOOK TWO



Aaron Rosenberg

S.C.E. concept by John J. Ordover and Keith R.A. DeCandido

Other eBooks in the Star Trek™:

Starfleet Corps of Engineers series from Pocket Books:

- #1: *The Belly of the Beast* by Dean Wesley Smith
- #2: *Fatal Error* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #3: *Hard Crash* by Christie Golden
- #4: *Interphase Book 1* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #5: *Interphase Book 2* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #6: *Cold Fusion* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #7: *Invincible Book 1* by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #8: *Invincible Book 2* by David Mack & Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #9: *The Riddled Post* by Aaron Rosenberg
- #10: *Gateways Epilogue: Here There Be Monsters* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #11: *Ambush* by Dave Galanter & Greg Brodeur
- #12: *Some Assembly Required* by Scott Ciencin & Dan Jolley
- #13: *No Surrender* by Jeff Mariotte
- #14: *Caveat Emptor* by Ian Edginton & Mike Collins
- #15: *Past Life* by Robert Greenberger
- #16: *Oaths* by Glenn Hauman
- #17: *Foundations Book 1* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #18: *Foundations Book 2* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #19: *Foundations Book 3* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #20: *Enigma Ship* by J. Steven York & Christina F. York
- #21: *War Stories Book 1* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #22: *War Stories Book 2* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #23: *Wildfire Book 1* by David Mack
- #24: *Wildfire Book 2* by David Mack
- #25: *Home Fires* by Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore
- #26: *Age of Unreason* by Scott Ciencin
- #27: *Balance of Nature* by Heather Jarman
- #28: *Breakdowns* by Keith R.A. DeCandido
- #29: *Aftermath* by Christopher L. Bennett
- #30: *Ishtar Rising Book 1* by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels
- #31: *Ishtar Rising Book 2* by Michael A. Martin & Andy Mangels
- #32: *Buying Time* by Robert Greenberger
- #33: *Collective Hindsight Book 1* by Aaron Rosenberg
- #34: *Collective Hindsight Book 2* by Aaron Rosenberg

Coming Soon:

- #35: *The Demon Book 1* by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills
- #36: *The Demon Book 2* by Loren L. Coleman & Randall N. Bills



COLLECTIVE HINDSIGHT
BOOK 2

Aaron Rosenberg



POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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

An Original Publication of POKET BOOKS



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

Copyright © 2003 by Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.



STAR TREK is a Registered Trademark of Paramount Pictures.

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

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

ISBN: 0-7434-8084-8

First Pocket Books Ebooks Edition November 2003

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

Visit us on the World Wide Web:

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

Chapter

1

Stardate 53852.1—First Officer's Log, Commander Sonya Gomez, U.S.S. da Vinci. We have encountered a ship known as the Dancing Star, an alien vessel that runs on solar radiation. During the Dominion War, the ship entered the Randall system and suffered a catastrophic buildup of its engines. Had the buildup run its course, it would have caused Randall's sun to go nova. Rather than endanger Federation outpost R5-3791, which was hidden in one of the system's asteroids, the alien ship's captain contained the buildup within the vessel, instantly vaporizing the entire crew. Shortly afterward, the da Vinci was sent to investigate the ship. Commander Salek—my predecessor as first officer and head of the S.C.E. team on the da Vinci under Captain Gold—sacrificed his life in order to save the system from a second catastrophic buildup, and also to keep the knowledge of both the Dancing Star and the outpost from the enemy. After that, the S.C.E. piloted the ship away from the sun, which should have destroyed it.

However, the vessel has turned up in interstellar space, over a hundred light-years from the Randall system. Having familiarized ourselves with the da Vinci's previous encounter with the Dancing Star, we are now considering what to do next.

“Clearly, the situation was more than they could handle.”

Fabian Stevens glared at Tev across the table in the *da Vinci*'s observation lounge, but the Tellari ignored him. Sonya Gomez couldn't stop herself from sighing. The three of them sat along with Captain Gold and P8 Blue, the former at the head of the table, the latter in her specially modified chair at the other end.

“It's not that simple, Tev,” she said, wondering if her second would ever learn. “The original team did a fine job completing their mission, which was to remove the *Dancing Star* before it endangered the outpost or drew Cardassian attention to its system.”

“With all due respect, Commander, I disagree.” Tev always managed to make phrases like that sound condescending, and to turn her title into an honorific rather than something she had earned. “They were sent to analyze that vessel, determine its origins and nature, and render it harmless. The fact that it is here now, hurtling rapidly toward a planet, proves they failed.”

“And I suppose you would have done better,” Fabian shot back.

“Of course, Specialist.”

“Well, now's your chance to prove it.” Both of them stopped to look at her, which was something anyway. “The bottom line is that we need to figure this ship out, and fast. And since Salek apparently missed something, we can't just rely upon his observations.”

“He did figure out how the ship worked,” Pattie offered, and Sonya nodded.

“At least well enough to get it operational, and to vent its fuel cells, yes. But he must have missed something. That doesn't mean he did a bad job—he didn't have a lot of time to study the ship fully. But we don't have to worry about giving away someone's position, and we don't have the distraction of a major interstellar war. Our job is to stop this ship completely, once and for all.”

Gold leaned forward. “So how do you plan to do that, Gomez?”

“I'm not sure yet, sir. But I think, to start with, that we need a fresh look at this ship. Tev and I are the only two who weren't on the team the first time around, so we're going to beam over. I want to examine it fully, and build our own theories, based only upon what we find. We can compare that to Salek's data later.” She glanced at the rest of her team. “While we're doing that, I want the three of you to go back over the original material. Look for anything you might have missed the first time about where this ship came from and how it works. Find out why it was out here, who the captain was—anything you didn't feel was crucial to the mission then. Any bit of information could be the key we need.”

Gold nodded. “Fresh perspectives, and a resifting of old material. Sounds like a plan. We should be within transporter range now.”

“Pattie, how much time do we have before the ship hits something?”

The Nasat checked her padd. “Twenty-three hours, Commander. Then it slams into Riallon Ix which has a population of twenty-one million.”

“Right. So we have twenty-two hours to figure this thing out and shut it down.” She stood up. “Let’s get to work. Tev, you’re with me.”

“I just don’t like him,” Fabian groused as he and Pattie headed back to engineering. “Sure, he’s smart but he acts like he’s the only one with any brains, and the rest of us are all morons.”

“He does have an ego, but that’s mainly because he won’t lie or conceal anything, including his pride in his own abilities.” Pattie’s antennae wobbled in the equivalent of a shrug. “If we put aside our modesty and talked about how good we really were at our jobs, don’t you think everyone would call me arrogant too?”

“Maybe,” he admitted as they passed through the door. “But it’s not just that he thinks he’s so good. It’s that he thinks the rest of us suck. I know I’m good, but I know you and Commander Gomez and Soloman and Bart and Carol are too, and I’d never put you guys down or claim you were incompetent.”

Pattie made a tinkling noise that was her equivalent of laughter. “Gee, thanks.”

“No, I mean it. We’re a team, right? And Tev isn’t part of that, because he doesn’t want to be. He’s not willing to work with anybody else, because he’s convinced that he’s better than the rest of us and that we only slow him down.”

“Well then, be glad that the commander is the one working with him, and not us.”

He chuckled. “Oh, believe me, I am.”

“It is unnecessary for both of us to do this, Commander.” Tev’s voice sounded in Sonya’s ear as the pair of them, clad in space suits, started walking through the *Dancing Star*’s corridors. “I can analyze this ship while you attend to other matters on the *da Vinci*.”

Sonya glanced over at him, saw her own helmeted face reflected in his faceplate. “I appreciate your confidence, Tev, but I disagree. You and I have different approaches, which means two different perspectives. I’d hate to think that we’d missed something here, and jeopardized our mission, because we were relying on a single viewpoint with all of its limitations and biases.”

Her second drew himself up to his full height and thrust out his chin, which had the unfortunate result of making his beard jut out against his faceplate like a stiff brush. “I do not miss anything, Commander, and I resent the suggestion.”

“Do you?” She resisted the urge to snap back at him, but also refused to coddle his ego any longer. Enough was enough. “Fine, then. Tell me what you see here.” She waved her hand, and they both glanced along the hallway.

“A single corridor,” her second replied immediately. “Cylindrical, though flattened at the bottom for easier passage. Indirect lighting. Doors spaced along each side, inset and with manual releases. Temperature of fifty degrees Celsius. No atmosphere.”

She nodded. “And what does all that tell you?”

“Clearly this is the main corridor. The atmosphere has never been restored after it was ignited by the *Randall V*, which indicates that the computers are either not fully operational or not programmed to provide air automatically.” He glanced back at her.

“And?”

The hint of a frown appeared. “And? There is nothing else to be gained thus far.”

“Not true, Tev. For example, you noted that the doors have manual releases. Judging from the shape, the crew must have hands and fingers like ours.”

He sniffed. “We know they did. The autopsy reports—”

“But I didn’t ask you what we knew from other data. I asked what we knew from what we could see right now. That’s why we’re doing this. Ignore everything you knew about this ship before we beamed aboard.” She ran one hand along the wall. “This isn’t metal, though it feels metallic. Looks more like ceramic, which would fit with the heightened temperature. Good heat resistance. The lights are actually tiny bulbs along a shelf just below the ceiling, with a lip that hides them but lets their light shine out. There’s no carpeting—the floors are the same material as the walls and ceiling—and no decoration. This wasn’t a luxury ship, or even a home. More like a science vessel or a military ship. Nothing here that wouldn’t be useful. No time or energy for frivolities.” She met his gaze and held it, and after a moment he shrugged.

“Point taken, Commander. Two views are more effective than one.” For the first time since she

met him, he said her title with a hint of respect, and she nodded back.

“Right. So let’s get back to our viewing, shall we?”

When the call came, Overseer Caldon was in his quarters. The message was patched through to him despite his orders to hold all messages while he slept, which meant that it must be important. The crew knew better than to disobey him without good reason.

The minute he heard the caller's voice, Caldon admitted that the crew's actions had been correct. He would discipline them for disobeying him, of course, but the punishment for withholding this call would have been far worse.

"I have a commission for you," his sponsor informed him.

"Of course, sir—I am at your disposal."

"Sensors in Quadrant Ten-Fifteen, Space Nine-Beta have detected a ship. Its configuration unknown, though it is large—nearly of a size with your own vessel. I wish to obtain it."

Caldon's mind was already considering the problem. "Have other ships been sighted in that area?"

"Not recently, but Federation ships have been known to pass through there."

"Of course." He stood, knowing his sponsor could not see the movement. "I will depart at once." He hesitated—should he mention it, or wait for his sponsor to do so? The former could be considered presumptuous.

"Excellent." After a brief pause, his sponsor spoke again. *"You will, of course, be compensated at your usual rates, plus a bonus for a speedy resolution."*

Ah. He had been right to wait. "Thank you, sir." The call ended, and Overseer Caldon headed toward the bridge, to inform his crew of their new mission. And to punish them for disturbing his rest.

Soloman sat and stared at his screen.

“Something wrong, Soloman?”

He glanced up at Pattie, and shook his head. “No, I’m just accessing the data from the older files.”

She glanced at his console. “Is that what you and 111 recorded from its computers?”

“Yes.” He stared at it again, and felt as much as saw the Nasat crouch down next to him.

“What’s going on? You can talk to me.”

He thought back to their last mission, dealing with that strange time-travel device in the Ludugian system. He and Pattie had been sent to analyze the device while Commander Gomez, Lt. Commander Tev, Lt. Commander Corsi, and Carol Abramowitz had gone after the Ferengi they’d found taking advantage of it. While the two of them had worked, they had struck up a conversation, and both of them had revealed things they’d never mentioned to their other teammates. It had certainly brought them closer.

“I—I’m afraid,” he finally admitted quietly.

“Afraid? Of what? The ship?”

“No, not physically afraid.” He tried to put his thoughts into words—it was so much easier with numbers! “The last time we studied the *Dancing Star*, we had Commander Salek, and Lt. Commander Duffy—and 111.” It still hurt just to say her name. “I was part of a bonded pair then.”

“Ah.” His teammate’s antennae quivered with sympathy. “And you’re afraid of reopening old wounds by looking at the data again?”

“It’s more than that.” He glanced over at her, then back at the screen. “It does hurt, of course, but I’ve learned to accept that. Though it’s more painful than usual, reliving something we did together. But I’m also worried. I’m not 110 anymore—I’m Soloman now. I’m not part of a pair. I’m less than a pair.”

All of them had gotten fairly good at reading Pattie’s expressions, and he recognized this one with surprise. It was rage. “Is this about those two idiots on Venus?” The Bynar pair assigned to the Venus terraforming project, 1011 and 1110, had treated Soloman with contempt during the *da Vinci* mission to aid the terraformers, calling him a singleton, one of their race’s worst insults. But he shook his head.

“No, I’m not worried about what they think of me. Nor about what any of my race think. But I am not as capable as 111 and I were together—that’s a fact. I cannot process as well alone as we could united. And I worry that I may not be able to access the information as well now as we did then. What if I miss something because I can no longer read it as clearly?”

Pattie nodded and straightened to her full height again, which only put her level with him while I

sat. "I know what you mean, actually. Fabian and I feel it, too. What if we've lost our edge now? What if we've forgotten something important, and are no longer sharp enough to catch it again?" She shrugged. "But I figure whatever we've lost in youth and eagerness we've more than made up for in experience. We're smarter than we were, and that includes you, Soloman. You may be less than the two of you were together, but you're a lot more than you were alone. You'll catch the important details. We all will."

She walked back to her own station, and Soloman glanced over at his screen again. He hoped she was right. But all he could do was his best, and that would have to be enough.

“Okay, how does this system work?”

Tev turned away from the collection array to glance at his superior. Was Gomez really so dense that she could not figure out the system herself? Then he noticed the look on her face. Ah, it was another test. No, he corrected himself. Not a test—a desire to compare data and conclusions. She was posing the question half-rhetorically and half as an invitation for him to share his own discoveries thus far. It was an odd approach, and not one he would have taken himself, but he had to admit that it was proving to be effective.

“This is the ship’s sole power source,” he replied, and wondered why she bothered to nod. He already knew he was right, or else he would not have mentioned it. Ah, but perhaps it was her way of verifying that she also knew this, and that they were in concurrence. Odd. “Stellar energy is gathered through the collection array on the exterior, funneled through these cables, and then stored in these panels.” He glanced at the panels, which shimmered slightly. “I do not recognize the material, though it resembles both glass and oil.”

“That’s because it’s oil that’s been fused into glass.” She showed him her own tricorder readings. “Very clever—it’s comparable to our transparent aluminum, taking the best qualities of two different materials and combining them into a new structure.”

“Of course. The energy is then drawn from these panels as necessary, either for fuel or to power other systems.” He traced a conduit with one hand, following it back to the thick column at the center of the room, and tapped one of the crystals embedded within it. “This is the ship’s actual engine. Power is pumped into these crystals, which magnify it and emit it through the thrusters placed along the hull. The tubes just beyond this store hydrogen and helium, which is ignited by the heat from the crystals. The sudden ejection of supercharged gases provides velocity, and smaller thrusts allow for course corrections.”

“Right.” Gomez tapped a few equations into her tricorder. “But there’s a problem. If I’m right”—she showed him her calculations and he was forced to admit that she was—“these crystals should only enable the ship to accelerate to warp one. Maybe warp two, if the ship was running at maximum power and drained itself completely. But according to the logs from R5-3791, the *Dancing Star* was doing warp three when it entered Randall V’s system.”

“Impossible, given this data.” Tev tapped one of the crystals again. “Nor has the engine been altered since its original discovery.”

His superior met his gaze, and they both nodded. Something didn’t add up.

“Let’s get back to the *da Vinci*,” she told him, “and tell the others. Maybe together we can figure out why this ship was going faster than its engines could possibly manage.”

As they waited to beam back, Tev was surprised to realize that he did not begrudge sharing the puzzle with his teammates. Oh, he knew he could solve it on his own, given enough time, but he found himself curious to see what conclusions the others would suggest.

Gold shook his head as Gomez sat back down. The entire S.C.E. team—Gomez, Tev, Blue, Steven and Soloman, as well as security chief Domenica Corsi, linguist Bart Faulwell, and cultural specialist Carol Abramowitz—was gathered in the observation lounge.

“So you’re telling me that this thing couldn’t have been traveling at those speeds?”

“No, it clearly was—the outpost’s data is very detailed, and their information on later even matches perfectly with our own logs, so we know their equipment was working properly. But those engines cannot produce that much acceleration.” Sonya glanced at the rest of her team. “So, any idea on how it managed that trick?”

“Could it have had a second engine?” Faulwell asked, but Stevens and Blue both shook their heads.

“We went over that thing top to bottom,” Stevens told his roommate. “Nothing else even remotely like an engine. And nothing in the thrusters themselves that could have amplified the output to that degree.”

“What about outside help?” Abramowitz said. “I know some races use delivery or launch systems for their ships—they have a much larger external engine that drops away after launch, or they have two ships linked together to increase initial velocity.”

“A workable system,” Tev said, and Gold kept the shock off his face. Had his second officer just indirectly complimented someone?

“The *Dancing Star* could have used such a system on its initial launch,” Gomez added. “And it’s currently moving at warp one-point-five, which suggests that whatever it used before wasn’t available for extra speed this time around. We didn’t find anything on the hull to suggest that extra engines were there, but that doesn’t mean they weren’t either.” She glanced around again. “Good suggestions, Carol. Any other ideas?”

Gold nodded to himself. That was one of the things he liked most about his first officer. She was good with her team, she acknowledged contributions by her staff, and she kept her options open. The time it was Corsi who spoke up.

“Since we’re talking about its initial launch system, do we know where this thing came from?”

Tev frowned. “I have computed its path, based upon its position within the Randall V system, its angle of trajectory, its speed, and an estimation of its travel time based upon the fatigue of its hull.” He tapped a command into his padd, and the conference room screen displayed a star map. Randall was circled, and a gold line ran from that off to one edge of the chart.

“That’s the Delta Quadrant,” Blue said, leaning forward to get a better look.

“Correct.” If anything, Tev’s frown deepened, which surprised Gold. Usually the Tellarite was smug about his discoveries. Why did he look almost displeased now? But that was quickly answered. “I have cross-referenced the location with the logs Starfleet has received from the *U.S.S. Voyager*, however, and have discovered a problem.” Another command, and that portion of the map expanded. The line

was now much thicker, and could be easily followed—as it ran right to a circle of absolute black.

“A black hole?” Stevens glanced at the chart, then back at Tev. “You’re telling me this ship came from a black hole?”

“No, of course not.” Now Gold knew why Tev was so unhappy—he’d been wrong. “Clearly it could not have originated there. But that is what the data suggests.”

“What if it came from even farther away?” Faulwell asked.

“Then it would have been traveling for a longer period of time,” Tev replied, “and it was not.”

“Not if it was going even faster originally.” They all turned to look at the slight, bearded linguist who shrugged. “Since it was already going faster than it should have when it reached the system, what’s to say it wasn’t going even faster before that?”

“Makes sense,” Gomez said. “Tev, extend the line farther out and let’s see what we get.” A moment later, the gold line projected past the black hole and off the far edge of the chart.

“Say, what’s that over there, anyway?” Stevens pointed to a spot past the black hole, and Tev obligingly expanded that section—Gold was pleased to see that he didn’t object or insult Stevens in the process. Maybe the man was learning, after all. With that portion enlarged, they could see a gold circle not far from the path, with a designation beside it. “That’s a supernova.”

“It’s not on the path, though,” Blue pointed out.

“Not right now,” Fabian replied. “But if this ship really did pass that black hole, it would have been thrown off course by the gravity well.” He worked with his padd for a moment, then beamed the information to Tev. “Does that look right to you?”

Tev glanced at it, then nodded. “Yes,” was all he said, but even that was a step in the right direction, and Gold exchanged a smile with Gomez. Tev input the new information and the gold line shifted—still ran straight from the black hole to Randall V, but now it angled as it passed the black hole. And it ran right across the supernova.

“So you’re saying this thing came from a supernova?” Gold asked.

“I don’t think that was its point of origin, no,” Stevens admitted. “But it did pass by this one. In fact”—he tapped a finger on the table absently—“what if it used the supernova for the energy boost Carol suggested?”

“You mean a slingshot?” Blue asked, and Stevens nodded. Tev had already begun typing commands into his padd, but Gold was lost.

“Hold on a second,” he said. “Indulge an old man—slingshot?”

“It’s a way to use the gravity of a sun or planet for momentum,” Gomez explained. “The ship circles the object, entering its gravity well and gaining speed from the added force, then whips around it fast enough to break free of orbit. Cut it too close and you’re trapped in orbit for good, too wide and

you don't actually gain much, but do it right and you boost your velocity significantly, and with a real fuel cost."

Tev looked up and nodded. "I have calculated the effects of the *Dancing Star* slingshotting around the supernova, and believe that Mr. Stevens is correct." Gold was fairly sure that was the first time Tev hadn't referred to Fabian as "Specialist" or "Technician." "I have put the new information on the screen." The image had changed—now it showed the line starting a little past the supernova. "The ship's initial speed would have been warp one-point-three, well inside its capabilities. After circling the supernova, it would have reached a speed of warp nine-point-eight. It would have reduced that to three-point-one by the time it reached Randall V."

"Good work, everyone," Gomez stated, and Gold admired the way she had carefully included all of them in the praise—a subtle reminder that they could do more together than alone. "Now we know where it came from, and we've solved the riddle of its excessive speed. Let's keep doing what we're doing, reevaluating and reexamining, and see what else we can figure out."

She stood to go, and Gold watched them all file out of the room, sparing one last glance at the screen before he exited as well. A part of him was horrified by the notion that this runaway ship could move so fast, but the explorer side of him just thought, *Oh, to fly so far, so fast.*

“Look at this input capacitor,” Sonya muttered. She and Tev were back in the *Dancing Star*’s engine room, examining more of its equipment, and the more she saw the more impressed she became. “It got a cascading valve structure—brilliant design. How much would you say this could take before overloading, Tev? Twelve gigawatts?”

He stepped over to examine it, then nodded. “Twelve-point-one, possibly twelve-point-two. Impressive design.”

She gestured around them. “And this is just one of fifty like it. That’s over six hundred gigawatts this ship can absorb at once. Amazing. Most cities can’t accommodate that much energy!” She ran her finger lightly over the capacitor. “This ship could have slingshotted *through* the supernova instead of around it.”

Tev glanced at his tricorder. “Yes, it could have. Within the corona, certainly—it would have been able to absorb more energy that way, and still been far enough from the core to escape.”

She nodded, thinking that one over. A ship that literally dove into a supernova for energy and acceleration! Amazing! The more she saw of this ship, the more it impressed her.

Another thought occurred to her, then. Salek’s report hadn’t mentioned the capacitors at all, only estimated the ship’s absorption rate. He had noted that it used stellar energy for fuel, of course, but he had suggested a more passive approach. Still, Salek’s main concern hadn’t been the ship’s operating specs, just what it was doing there and how to get rid of it quickly.

As they continued their investigation, Sonya let herself wonder about the Vulcan she had replaced. She had never met Salek, of course, but she had read his files and his record, and had heard stories about him from Fabian, Carol, Pattie, and of course Tev’s predecessor, Kieran Duffy. Salek had been a good commander, and his handling of the situation at Randall V had been exemplary, sacrificing himself to save everyone else.

Instinctively, she thought, *Just like Kieran did at Galvan*. She banished that thought quickly.

But Sonya found herself wondering about how Salek’s mind had worked, particularly as an engineer.

She thought back over the re-creation she’d watched about the original encounter with the *Dancing Star*. Salek and Fabian had examined the engine room, just as she and Tev were doing now. He had announced that Carol had been right about the ship running on solar energy, and had then told Kieran

that he thought the crew had been killed by an internal energy release. But how had he known that so quickly?

“Fabian,” she called out, tapping her combadge. His reply came immediately.

“What’s up, Commander?”

“You were here with Salek during that first sweep of the engine room, right?”

“Yeah, he and I went that way and Duff and Pattie went forward, to the bridge.”

“How did he figure out the ship’s system so quickly? In the re-creation it seemed like he knew almost immediately how it worked.”

“Well, that’s just the way Salek was,” Fabian replied. *“Actually, Carol had already suggested that it was solar-powered, so he was already thinking that way.”*

“So he’d made up his mind beforehand?”

“No, but he had a theory already. Duff told me once that that’s how Salek worked. He’d come up with a theory to fit the situation, and then see if it held up. Every time he got new data, he’d plug it into the theory. If it broke, he’d come up with a new theory. If it almost fit, he’d figure out where to bend the theory so they matched. And if everything fit: voilà!”

Tev nodded. “A sensible approach.”

Sonya nodded as well. “So he always had a theory, for every situation?”

“Not instantly, no,” Fabian replied. *“He’d listen to the initial data. Then he’d come up with a theory based on that, and he’d test it as he went.”*

“Okay, thanks.” Sonya thought about that. It did make sense. It was inductive reasoning, she realized. Salek had formed theories and then tested them against the data to see if they held true. A good, solid method, and excellent for an engineer. Any time he had to create an item, he could figure out what the device had to do and then break that down into specifics. If the first method he thought wouldn’t do the trick he’d try a different one until he found a method that would provide the necessary results.

That just wasn’t how she thought, was all. She had a tendency to wait until she’d gathered all the data she could possibly get, and then try to piece together a theory from that. Deductive reasoning—from small to large, rather than the other way around. Her way didn’t work as well for straight engineering—she got hung up on details too easily, and if she missed even one element she couldn’t see the bigger picture, like trying to build a puzzle whose image you didn’t know beforehand, with missing some of the pieces. But it was a perfect fit for most S.C.E. missions, because they involved reverse-engineering instead. And by not jumping to conclusions, by waiting until she had all the data, Sonya could be sure that she had everything necessary to reach the right conclusion.

Which gave her the advantage here, she realized. The problem with inductive reasoning was that, if all the data fit your established hypothesis, you assumed it was right—if you had already decided the

the hole was square, and all the pieces fit through that hole, you would believe that the square was the answer. But if you looked at all the pieces first, and saw that they were all triangles, you'd know the correct answer was the triangle. The square was the wrong answer because it didn't match, but it seemed to work because none of the triangles were too big to fit through it. So Salek's theory had seemed right because nothing had contradicted it, but he hadn't had all the facts beforehand. If he had been completely right the *Dancing Star* would not be active again, and they wouldn't be here. They had more facts now, more to work with, and were more likely to come up with the real answer, especially if they let the details form the answer rather than the other way around.

Hindsight, Sonya thought ruefully. Looking back now, they could see the things that the team had missed the first time around, and where they'd gone wrong. She just hoped that catching those past errors would let them find the real solution and make the right decision this time. It was unlikely that they'd get a third try at it.

Numbers scrolled across the screen, and Soloman lost himself among them. As was always the case when he worked with code like this, a part of him felt free, able to soar again—no more restriction of words or emotions, just pure logic and computation. But another part of him wept, because the numbers were trapped behind the monitor's glass while he was trapped within his own body. If he were standing at the actual computer access port on the *Dancing Star*, he could have switched on his belt unit and simply spoken directly to the computer, the code flowing between them with no barrier. And, when 111 had been alive, the three of them would have formed a perfect trinity, the numbers dancing back and forth in a rhythm he still ached to recapture.

But Commander Gomez had ordered him and Fabian and Pattie to go through their old files first, which meant he only had the data he and 111 had downloaded that first time.

While doing so, he noticed a line of code—he and 111 had found it before, obviously, or it wouldn't be in the recording now. But they hadn't paid much attention to it—it had not been relevant at the time. The commands embedded in it were so simple, so direct, and so restricted in their conditions of trigger that it had been easy to dismiss them as unimportant. But conditions had changed, and the code was all too applicable now.

Soloman's face burned, and his fingers almost twitched, which could have been disastrous—a single wrong keystroke and the entire recording might have been altered, or even purged. He had a moment to pause to collect himself, which had the unfortunate result of leaving those particular lines of code sitting on the screen, staring back at him accusingly. He'd been so worried that he would not be able to perform as well now, as Soloman, as he and 111 had done before as a pair. He'd asked Pattie what would happen if he missed something now, or couldn't decipher something again, because of that lack of 111. But it had never occurred to him that the opposite might be the case. That he might find something he and 111 had missed.

It scared him, making him wonder what else they might have missed, here and on other missions. Now that he knew that they had not been infallible, he found himself questioning all of the decisions they had made together, all of the data they thought they'd decoded. But another part of him, a part he was frightened to admit existed, was thrilled by the prospect. Ever since 111's death he had tormented himself with the conviction that they had been perfect together in every way, and thus by himself he could never hope to match that perfection. But they hadn't been perfect. And, while it might diminish his pride in what they'd had, it offered him hope that he could perform just as well by himself as they had together. Perhaps better—he had sacrificed speed, and the ability to have his computations double-checked instantly, but perhaps he had gained a bit more insight, and a bit more care in his work.

Pushing these notions away for later examination, Soloman rose from his chair. Time enough to consider such things later. For now, he had to bring this data to the commander.

“Okay,” Sonya began. They were all gathered around the conference table again, several hours after their last meeting. Carol Abramowitz had spent the time studying the data, trying to figure out what kind of people they were dealing with, but it was difficult, given the lack of any indication of personal items. Of course, it was possible that any personal items were vaporized along with the crew back on Randall V, but that still left her with precious little to work with. She did know that these people had been honorable, and they’d valued all life. They’d also been more tolerant of heat, and had found new and impressive ways to harness solar energy. And they’d made a ship strong enough to dive right into a sun.

“So, what have we learned?” Sonya asked.

“Well, we know the ship’s based on solar energy,” Fabian said. “Not just propulsion but lighting, heating, circulation, everything. Its sensors actually operate mostly in the infrared spectrum, picking up heat signatures and translating those into three-dimensional image maps.”

“Its shielding is mostly absorption,” Pattie added. “The *Dancing Star* didn’t have any weapons when we first encountered it, or any shielding against energy weapons. Instead it had a strong hull and a collection array to protect it from solar energy and then absorb that energy for its own purposes. That’s why it could dive into a sun without harm, because the energy around it was siphoned off for the ship’s use.”

“The computer systems are efficient,” Soloman said. “Not overly complicated, but very solid. Particularly resistant to heat and to vibration, even more than in most starships. The coding is not the most sophisticated, but it’s very clean.”

“The ship routinely used stars for both energy and acceleration,” Tev said. “And the capacitors are built to handle exactly that type of massive input.”

“It also went into a sun—all the way into one—and came out unscathed,” Carol commented. She didn’t get all of the technical details the others were sharing, but that fact had impressed itself on her.

Sonya nodded at her. “Good point. We also know that Pattie and Kieran disconnected the collection arrays after Salek’s death and before launching the ship into the sun. Yet it has power now, and is approaching overload levels again.” She tapped the table. “What does that tell us?”

“Was the array reconnected?”

Tev shook his head. “No, it is still isolated.”

“So the ship was drawing power in some other way.”

“Right. But what?”

Carol watched them all thinking. She wished that she could contribute more, sometimes. Then something occurred to her. “Um, Pattie said most of the ship’s protection when it entered a sun was its collection array, right?”

The others looked up at her, and Pattie wiggled her antennae in agreement. “Yes. There’s some shielding material between the hull and the interior walls, to keep the energy from leaking through fully, but mostly it was the array that siphoned off energy before it could prove dangerous.”

“But, with the array disconnected, how did the ship survive being inside Randall V’s sun?” Soloman leaned forward. “I mean, never mind its powering back up—why wasn’t it incinerated?”

The engineers all looked at each other. Then Bart, her fellow nonengineer, spoke up.

“I’ve got a question, too. Pattie, did you just say that the ship has shielding between the hull and the inner walls?”

The Nasat nodded. “Yes. The hull is unusually conductive, and the shielding keeps energy from penetrating into the ship proper.”

“But why make a hull conductive at all?” Fabian wondered out loud. “I mean, why not just put the shielding on the outside and be done with it?”

Sonya gasped, and everyone turned toward her. “That’s it! Carol, you’re a genius! The hull’s an energy conductor! The entire ship is one giant absorption array!”

Everyone stared, then started nodding. It always amazed Carol that, even at times like this, they didn’t just all start talking over each other. Instead, someone spoke and the others listened, with occasional interjections. This time it was Pattie who commented first.

“It all makes sense,” she said. “The collection array was a supplemental power source, not the primary. So when we disconnected it, we thought we’d prevented the ship from powering up but all we’d done was slow the process down.”

“And, with the entire hull absorbing energy,” Fabian cut in, “the ship can easily withstand diving into a sun. It’s absorbing power from all sides, and all that energy gets sent through the capacitors and into the collection plates. The shielding makes sure none of it goes into the rest of the ship instead and funnels it all toward the engine room.”

“So when it was sent into the sun,” Sonya finished, “it just used that to power up again.”

“That still leaves one problem,” Gold pointed out. “Duffy and Stevens programmed the *Dancing Star* to fly itself into Randall V’s sun. They didn’t give it any instructions past that. So what’s it doing all the way out here? Even with its power restored, something made it leave that sun and launch itself in a straight line.”

“I may have an answer to that,” Soloman said. “Many of its computer files had been wiped before we found it that first time, but not everything was lost. I have been going back over it, and I think I’ve found the relevant command.” He glanced down at his padd as if for confirmation. “Each internal vent knocked the computer systems offline, but they rebooted after a suitable period. An emergency protocol demands that if the ship’s systems shut down twice within roughly one Federation week, the ship will immediately start a preprogrammed course. Most likely back to their homeworld, for repairs.” He looked embarrassed, the first time Carol could remember seeing that expression on his

face. “The commands were hardwired into the system, which may be why we missed it before.”

Gold nodded. “Makes sense—if it’s broken down twice in one week something’s wrong, so it’s recalled for servicing. And, between its crew’s sacrifice and then Salek’s, that was twice in a single day. So once it was online again, and had enough power, it headed home.”

“Why is it close to overloading again, then?” Corsi asked. “Isn’t it burning off the energy as it goes?”

“Not enough, apparently.” Fabian thought about it for a minute. “Actually, I think I know why. And it’s our own fault.” He shook his head. “Salek disconnected the safety protocols so that he could vent internally that second time. I’ll bet some of those protocols included commands for automatically venting energy to prevent an overload. Plus, I did retask some of its vents for use as guns—so it can use those vents unless someone engages them from the weapons console I added.”

“You had no way of knowing that it would reemerge,” Sonya reminded him. “Why bother to reactivate those protocols if it’s just going to sit in a sun forever?”

Gold glanced at everyone. “Well, I’m impressed, as usual. So now you know how it works, and why it’s moving, and why it’s overheating. What’s next?”

“Now we deactivate it properly,” Sonya replied. “We—” Whatever she was about to say was cut off by a call from Shabalala on the bridge.

“Captain, a ship just dropped out of warp and is heading right for us.”

“On my way,” Gold replied, standing up. The others followed suit. “Good work, people. Come with me, Tev, you’d better come with me.”

As they all headed out, Bart leaned in toward Carol and whispered, “Genius?”

Carol just grinned back at him and, very maturely, stuck out her tongue.

- [*The Rough Guide Snapshot France: Poitou-Charentes and the Atlantic Coast pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi*](#)
- [Ring \(Xeelee, Book 4\) pdf](#)
- [download No Need to Knead: Handmade Artisan Breads in 90 minutes online](#)
- [read online The Allotment Chef](#)
- [Paladin of Souls \(Chalion, Book 2\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)

- <http://thermco.pl/library/The-Rough-Guide-Snapshot-France--Poitou-Charentes-and-the-Atlantic-Coast.pdf>
- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/All-My-Life--New-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://weddingcellist.com/lib/The-Jewish-Gospels.pdf>
- <http://chelseaprintandpublishing.com/?freebooks/Capitalism--The-Unknown-Ideal.pdf>
- <http://test.markblaustein.com/library/Everyday-Food--Fresh-Flavor-Fast--250-Easy--Delicious-Recipes-for-Any-Time-of-Day.pdf>