

## INTERPHASE BOOK ONE

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Nostrene could sense the tension permeating the room, though he himself refused to display any outward indications except that of perfect calm. His posture contrasted with that of his crew and the scientific advisors bustling about the command deck as they made last-minute adjustments or ran final tests.

Consoles and viewscreens displayed a vast array of data, each one dedicated to some facet of the monumental experiment currently under way.

Holding at light speed minus three, reported the subordinate manning the helm with no attempt to hide the excitement in his voice. Nostrene could not blame the younger officer, who was serving aboard ship on his first assignment and was displaying much

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of the same excitability and enthusiasm he himself had at that age.

Report current status, Dlyax. In response, one of the scientists stationed near the front of the command deck turned to face Nostrene, the deep red hue

of his crystalline body reflecting the harsh illumination emitted from the deck plating.

Commander, the drive system appears to be functioning normally. Our diagnostic scans show no anomalies or irregularities. It is our consensus that the test can proceed without further delay.

Of course they would think that, Nostrene mused. Their reputations are being tested here today as much as any new propulsion system.

Tholian ships had enjoyed success with their ability to attack from positions of stealth and to utilize their much feared energy web generators, draining the power and crushing the hull of even the sturdiest enemy vessel. But it had been Nostrenes experience that ships controlled by enemies had faced in past battles had possessed definite advantages in speed. While Tholian vessels had been able to travel faster than light for generations, they never had been able to achieve speeds comparable to those recorded by ships of other races. The vessels most frequently underscoring this shortcoming, to Nostrenes chagrin, belonged to the United Federation of Planets.

This concern had been brought to the forefront during the recent war between the Federation and the Dominion. Alpha Quadrant forces had nearly succumbed to the might of the so-called Founders and their legions of genetically engineered soldiers, the JemHadar. The Assemblys tenuous state of peace with the Federation had strengthened during the conflict, allowing the Tholian people to largely observe the war. That position fit securely with the nonaggression pact they had established with the

Dominion. Though it had not been popular opinion to state publicly at the time, Nostrene was certain that Tholian forces would have fallen quickly to the vastly superior strength exhibited by the Dominion. Fortunately the war had ended, with the Founders and the JemHadar being forced back into Gamma Quadrant space before his suspicions could be tested. Such concerns could soon be put to rest, however, should the experiment they were conducting here today prove successful. Tholian vessels would be regarded as among the fastest in the Quadrant.

Additionally, the ability to channel newly harnessed stores of power would lend additional strength to the defenses and armament of their ships.

Satisfied with Dlyaxs report, Nostrene said, Very well, resume acceleration.

As he gave the order, his eyes shifted from screens displaying information transmitted by the ships network

of sensors to the command decks main

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viewscreen. The stars as rendered by the computer remained still, but he knew that in a few moments they would twist and distort as their ship crossed the threshold into subspace.

Light speed minus one, his helmsman called out, and Nostrene braced himself for the impending quantum shift. He knew it was an absurd notion, as the ships inertial dampening systems prevented him or anyone else on the ship from feeling the affects of acceleration. But it was something he had always done, almost instinctively, since childhood. It added to the thrill, he thought. In his minds eye, he saw the subspace field erupting into reality as the ship stretched, extended and distended into infinity.

Plus one, the helmsman said. Continuing to accelerate. Except for the subordinates reports of the ships progress, all else was silent on the command deck as engineers and scientists continued checking the telemetry fed to them by the ships sensors.

This was the easy part, in actuality, with the difficult tasks yet to come. First the ship had to accelerate successfully to its uppermost obtainable velocity.

Then endurance tests would begin as the crew determined how long the ship could sustain that measure of speed. If those experiments were successful, then the celebrations would begin in earnest, and merely wary adversaries would now have reason to fear the Tholian Assembly.

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Nostrenes reverie was broken by the first in what quickly became a series of alarms coming from the observation stations at the front of the command deck.

Commander, Dlyax said, we are experiencing a power fall-off.

Moving toward the forward stations, Nostrene replied, What is causing it?

The scientist was keying commands into his console and studying the rapidly shifting patterns of light on his suite of monitors. I cannot ascertain the cause. All systems are functioning normally, but there is an unexplained power drain in the drive system.

For a moment, Nostrene was worried that the ship might be rendered inert in space. How serious is this drain?

It is not severe, Commander, but it is enough to disrupt our subspace field.

Given the choice between slowing to sublight speeds on his own or being ripped from subspace by a malfunctioning propulsion system, Nostrene preferred the first option. Decelerate to light minus eight. Turning back to Dlyax, he said, Initiate a diagnostic check of the drive systems.

Another voice called out from behind him, Commander, our sensors are registering some unusual readings.

Now what? Was the entire ship falling apart?

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What is it? he asked as he made his way to the sensor officers station.

The subordinate manning the station did not look up at his commanders approach. I have detected a disruption in space at bearing four point nine relative to our current position. It wasnt there during my initial scans a few moments ago, Commander.

The report was far too vague for Nostrenes tastes. Be more specific.

I cannot, Commander. The sensors are behaving quite erratically. They report it as an object, yet I cannot verify the readings.

If an object had been detected so close to the ship, Nostrene knew that automated defensive systems would have alerted the crew to possible danger. That none of that had happened deepened his concern.

Was an enemy who could render themselves invisible to sensors attacking them? Was a Romulan ship out there, attempting a covert strike?

Is there a flaw in the sensor equipment? Nostrene asked.

Not that I have been able to find, Commander, the sensor officer replied. It is as if this region of space is physically deteriorating.

A localized phenomenon? There were no intelligence reports of anything unusual encountered in this area. It was a lightly traveled region, one of the reasons it was selected as the site of the experiment in

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the first place.

Put that area on the main screen, he ordered.

All eyes turned as the image on the forward screen changed. At first Nostrene saw no discernible difference from the field of stars that had been there previously.

It appeared tranquil, almost the very image he carried in his mind even when he was planetbound to tide him over until he could return to space once again.

There, the helmsman said, pointing at the screen.

Upper left quadrant.

Nostrene saw it too. Amid the blanket of stars beckoning to them, a dark area had appeared. It was small but opaque, and therefore contrasting sharply against the starfield.

Magnify that area, Nostrene said, stepping closer to the screen. The image shifted again and now the dark area dominated the center of the screen. It was irregular in shape, its edges fluctuating with no noticeable pattern. Everyone on the command deck watched as the patch of darkness expanded, then contracted to almost disappear entirely before repeating the process all over again.

It looks like a hole in space, the helmsman said.

Nostrene agreed. In all the years he had traveled space he had never seen anything like what was displayed on the screen.

I am detecting spiking radiation levels coming

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from that area, Commander, the sensor officer reported. They are slight, but there nonetheless.

Is there a danger to the ship? Nostrene asked.

The subordinate took an extra moment to confirm his readings before replying. Negative, Commander, at least so long as we maintain this distance.

Commander!

Nostrene's attention snapped back to the screen at the call in time to see the interior of the hole, as he had come to think of it, shift as a blue-green field of energy appeared.

Enlarge that, Nostrene ordered, and the image appeared to jump forward. The energy distortion became more detailed and he could see static discharges and rippling effects as the field undulated within the confines of the dark area.

Are you saying the sensors register none of that? he asked.

That is correct, Commander. We see it, but our sensors give no indication that it exists at all.

In front of him, the helmsman nearly came out of his chair as he pointed to the screen. Commander, look!

On the viewer, the energy field wavered and expanded violently as, out of the nothingness that was the dark hole amid the stars, an object began to materialize, quickly taking on form and substance. With the image magnified as it was, Nostrene easily made out

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seams between scarred hull plates and areas where bare metal now shone through what had once been a brightly painted finish.

A ship.

Sensor readings?

Behind him, the sensor officer studied his console and shook his head. I have managed to tune the sensors to at least detect the vessel, but readings are inconclusive at best. There are no signs of life or power sources. I believe the ship to be a derelict, Commander.

Nostrene suspected as much, having already recognized the design of the ship as soon as it had become visible. He hadn't seen such a vessel except in historical documents, but there was no mistaking the large, saucer-shaped hull supported by a pylon above a smaller cylindrical secondary section and the pair of long nacelles resting on their own support pylons. Though the design had been refined and improved over the many years the Tholians had been aware of it, the basic tenets had remained the same.

Behind him, his weapons officer confirmed his suspicion.

Commander, our tactical database identifies it as a Federation Constitution-class starship.

According to our information, that model of vessel was retired from active service long ago.

Are there any indications of other ships in this area? Both the weapons and sensor officers replied

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with negative reports.

So what is it doing in our space? Dlyax asked, staring at the ghostly image of the ship.

Nostrene had no answer. Learning of the ships presence in Tholian space would certainly put some government officials on edge. Despite the warming of relations with the Federation, distrust and even contempt for its principles continued to simmer within the ranks of the Assembly's elder statesmen.

Seeing the ship on the screen, however, his instincts told him such worries were unfounded. If the ship was indeed a derelict, then it was likely that neither the Federation nor the Assembly had any knowledge of its whereabouts, let alone the circumstances surrounding its appearance here and now, long after such a vessel would have been retired from normal service.

Such judgments, though, were not his to make.

We must report this discovery, he said finally.

They will know best how to proceed.

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As he traversed one of the numerous corridors of Starfleet Headquarters, Captain Montgomery Scott felt as though red-alert klaxons were sounding but only he could hear them. His eyes couldn't help but be drawn to officers mingling or casually going about their business. He returned a few polite nods but didn't stop to talk or even smile back when their glances met his. There was no time for niceties.

It was a key difference between Headquarters and serving on a starship, he had learned. People here could be on full alert, but hardly ever at the same time.

His commbadge chirped for his attention, followed by a female voice. Captain Scott, please report to 11

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Briefing Room 23 immediately.

Aye, lassie, he said as he tapped the badge, and since we last spoke, where did ya think I might be goin'?

The question went unanswered. Ill tell them youre still on your way, sir.

Scott out. He sighed as he severed the connection. Whatever it was that awaited him in Briefing Room 23 must be important indeed to have his assistant page him twice in as many minutes.

Probably some politician with his nose all out of joint.

Scotty didn't break stride as he turned toward a pair of doors that parted at his approach. As he entered the briefing room, the first person he saw was a man wearing civilian clothes and the puckered expression he normally associated with a typical Federation diplomat.

Ach. Some days it just doesn't pay to get out of bed, he thought as he braced himself for what was sure to be a long day. As he made his way to one of the empty chairs surrounding the conference table, Scotty put on his admirals smile. It was the one that allowed him to bite the inside of his cheek when a politician inevitably said something to irritate him.

In addition to the civilian eyeing him impatiently, Scotty noted the unfamiliar Starfleet commander also seated at the table. An Andorian, the commanders

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rich blue skin contrasted sharply with the dark colors of his uniform. Scotty decided that the commander, like a growing number of officers he ran into these

days, looked like hed just graduated from the Academy.

Does his mother know hes playin Starfleet?

As quickly as the thought surfaced, Scotty admon-ished himself. Not everyone could be an eighty-year old captain with fifty or more years in Starfleet, after all.

Good morning, Captain. Thanks for joining us on such short notice, said the third person in the brief-ing room and the only one Scotty recognized, Admiral William Ross.

The admiral presented an imposing figure dressed in his dark Starfleet uniform. Jet black hair, cut short and liberally speckled with gray, added to a severe expression dominated by piercing blue eyes. Ross was one of the few flag officers Scotty respected implicit-ly, due primarily to the fact that the admiral had risen through the ranks while serving in the fleet instead of occupying staff positions. He had commanded vessels and people in peace and in war, and he had earned the trust of those he led.

Ross also knew that most issues faced by com-manders in the field rarely if ever resembled the tidy tactical problems presented to cadets at the Academy.

It gave him a wisdom shaped by experience that

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Scotty usually found lacking in other officers in simi-lar positions. It also made Ross in high demand at Starfleet Headquarters, especially during critical situ-ations.

If the admiral was here now, then something big had to be brewing.

Aye, Admiral, Scotty said as he settled into one of the conference chairs. What have ye got?

We have a developing situation that requires not only your departments expertise, but your own as well.

Ross indicated the Andorian and the civilian. This is Commander Grelin, our liaison with Starfleet Intelligence, and this is Mr. Marshall of the Diplomatic Corps.

Considering the presence of Grelin and Marshall, Scotty hardly believed whatever was happening was going to be a routine matter for the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, the department he had been appointed to oversee by Ross himself.

The assignment had come as part thoughtful ges-ture and part impassioned plea, with the admiral see-ing a singular opportunity to take advantage of Scottys vast experience and unique perspective. After all, how many other officers could lay claim to having



served aboard Starfleet vessels more than a century ago?

After his rescue almost eight years before from the wreck of the U.S.S. Jenolen, where he had been

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suspended in a transporter beam for seventy-five years, Scotty had flirted with self-pity at being removed from his friends and loved ones by nearly a century. It hadn't taken him long, however, to embrace this new era and all the challenges it presented. The offer from Ross had come soon afterward, but Scotty really hadn't needed an invitation to return to Starfleet. In his heart, he had never truly left.

Ross said, Captain, Starfleet was contacted earlier this morning by representatives of the Tholian Assembly. They reported the presence of what appears to be a derelict Federation starship within their territorial borders. I don't think I need to tell you how upset the Tholians are.

It was an understatement, Scotty knew. The Tholians had always been protective of their region of space, only rarely allowing foreign vessels to cross their boundaries. Relations between the Assembly and the Federation had improved in recent years, but they were still nowhere near what Scotty would call stable.

This is of great concern to us, Marshall said, insinuating himself into the conversation in that manner all diplomats seemed to employ and which almost always annoyed Scotty to no end. Just seeing one of our ships in their space is enough for the Tholians to declare all-out war.

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I don't think the situation is that extreme, Mr. Marshall, Ross countered. One of the few good things that came out of the Dominion War was better diplomatic relations with the Tholians. He didn't bother to shield the skeptical look on his face as he added, At least, that's what we keep hearing from the Diplomatic Corps.

Those relations came at a very high price, Admiral, Marshall said, bristling at Ross's jab. We intend to cultivate them, not jeopardize the peace every time one of your captains steers a ship where it's not supposed to go.

Ross didn't rise to the baiting. Sir, Starfleet has not authorized any vessel to enter Tholian space. This incident was a complete surprise to us, just as it

should have been. The ship in question hasn't seen active duty since stardate 5685.5.

The date struck Scotty with the intensity of a physical blow. All of the puzzle pieces fell into place as the completed picture became clear to the seasoned engineer.

The Defiant, he said, his voice almost a whisper.

That's impossible, Grelin blurted, his antennae twitching noticeably in alarm. The Defiant is currently docked at Deep Space Nine. They couldn't possibly have traveled to Tholian space in such a-

Laddie, Scotty said, cutting the Andorian off, did they stop teaching history at the Academy altogether,

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or are ye just too accustomed to hearin' five-digit stardates? He turned to Ross. Now I know why I'm here, sir.

Ross couldn't suppress a smile. Gentlemen, in 2268 the Constitution-class U.S.S. Defiant was lost with all hands when it traveled into an interspatial rift in an area of space subsequently claimed as a territorial annex of the Tholian Assembly. According to the Tholians, the rift reopened two weeks ago, and the Defiant has been scanned drifting in and out of it nine times since its initial reappearance. The average duration of its visibility is three hours and twelve minutes, though the intervals are by no means consistent.

In more than a century, just one Federation starship has encountered the Defiant since her disappearance.

That ship had the only opportunity to learn what happened to the ship and her crew. Ross indicated Scotty with a gesture. We're just lucky enough to have a member of that ship's crew with us today.

Steely blue eyes fixed on the engineer.

Scotty, do you want another crack at her?

The Defiant. It was one of many memorable missions Scotty had been a part of as a crewmember of the original Enterprise. It also was one of a handful of mysteries they'd encountered that remained unsolved. Leaving the Defiant locked in the spatial rift had never set well with him. The vessel numbered

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among the original Constitution-class starships, and it was one of two such vessels that Scotty had seen lost or destroyed during his tenure aboard the Enterprise.

Three, counting the ol' girl herself, Scotty reminded himself.

Constitution-class ships held a special place in his heart, as such a vessel was where Scotty had served

his first tour as chief engineer. The fleet museum contained a Constitution, and he had traveled there many times in recent years. He enjoyed walking the decks or inspecting the bridge and, on rare occasions, treating himself to the warm familiarity of her engine room. Her powerful warp engines may have been silenced long ago, but Scotty could close his eyes and almost hear their comforting throb of power. Hoping his voice wouldn't break, he said. Aye, that I do, sir.

Admiral, Commander Grelin said as he leaned forward in his chair, what's to say this isn't some kind of ploy to lure us into a trap?

By way of reply, Ross thumbed a keypad on the tabletop that activated the briefing room's main viewscreen. It promptly displayed an image of the century-old starship, glowing a fluorescent blue seemingly from within and winking in and out of sync with the universe.

This was relayed to us from one of our Epsilon

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deep space reconnaissance stations that was retasked to monitor the region, Ross said. We've no reason to believe what we're seeing isn't authentic.

Scotty remembered that day, ages ago, when he had first laid eyes on the missing ship. Admiral, that's just what she looked like from the bridge of the Enterprise.

This invitation to reclaim the Defiant doesn't come lightly, Ross said. The Tholians aren't excited about a Federation ship working in their space, but they want this situation resolved before word of the rift and the ship spreads to every sightseer and salvager in the quadrant. They're grateful enough for our assistance during the Dominion War that they're allowing us an escorted attempt to get the Defiant back. We're going to take it.

Marshall nodded. We're looking forward to working with the Tholians in such an atmosphere of cooperation.

It is an unprecedented endeavor and could do much to improve our relations with the Assembly. But know this, gentlemen I believe the progress we've made with the Tholians is far more important than the recovery of some relic that's remembered only by history buffs.

Diplomats, Scotty huffed to himself. Mr. Marshall, I don't know about all the political ramifications, but surely we'd agree that it's important to bring the ship's crew home for the final respects they deserve.

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Marshall was unmoved. I don't think it's important enough to risk war.

Scotty could sense himself falling victim to what he dubbed the Robert Fox Syndrome. It was a term coined by his longtime friend Leonard McCoy and used to describe a longing desire to launch an inflexible politician from a photon torpedo tube.

Whereas Scotty might have been tempted to indulge that inclination in his younger days, age and wisdom instead told him he would be better off if he simply returned his attention to Ross.

Admiral, I'd like to head out there and help with recovery. No one alive knows the ins and outs of a Constitution-class ship better than I do.

If time wasn't an issue, I'd agree, Ross replied.

But the Tholians aren't a patient people, and they're already complaining that we're taking too long. Given the difficulties we're likely to encounter during the mission, both technical and political, it's vital that whomever we send to lead this mission be an innovative thinker as well as a level-headed diplomat. There are two ships with S.C.E. detachments in range of the Defiant: the *Musgrave* and the *da Vinci*. Your opinion?

I'd send the *da Vinci*, sir, Scotty said. Captain Gold has the temperament to handle the Tholians, and if anybody can get the Defiant out of that mess, it's Commander Gomez and her team.

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Ross stood, signaling an end to the meeting. Very well. Proceed as you think best, Captain, and keep us informed.

Walking toward the door, Marshall halted abruptly and turned on his heel to face Scotty. Remember, Captain, that preserving the peace between the Federation and the Tholians is more important than a single starship, whether it's the Defiant or the *da Vinci*.

Not replying to the diplomat, Scotty instead looked to Ross. The expression on the admiral's face confirmed to the engineer that he, reluctantly, agreed.

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As he absently swirled his drink, watching a wedge of lime chase stray ice cubes, Kieran Duffy's mind drifted for what he believed would be the last few minutes he might grab for himself until their return to Federation space.

Not that the mess hall of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* was the most intimate of hideaways. Crewmembers popped in

and out for a cup of coffee or a bite to eat as if the place were each persons home kitchen. Everyone stopping in took a second to be friendly or at least acknowledge his presence, Duffy noticed. The da Vinci carried a lot of camaraderie even for a Starfleet vessel, but Duffy didnt find that surprising. After all, there were only forty-two people onboard, and most

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of them numbered among Starfleets top engineers. And there goes one of them now, Duffy thought as he caught sight of the one person for whom he wouldnt mind breaking from his reverie. Sonya Gomezs form flashed past the mess hall door, then reappeared as she back-stepped into the doorway. Her eyes nar-rowed, then her smile widened a bit.

I thought that was you, she said as she walked toward his table. I wondered why I hadnt seen you around.

Duffy shrugged. Not much for me to do yet, really.

Got a minute to sit?

Ill take a minute, Gomez replied. Im getting a drink. Need a refill?

Thanks, he answered. Its quinine water, not so-

Not soda water, she finished for him. Over ice and with a lime twist. Same vile stuff you have every time you sneak away to think.

Gomez returned from the replicator moments later with a clinking glass in one hand and a steaming mug in the other. She set Duffys fresh drink before him as she took the seat across the table, raising her mug in a quick cheer before sipping from it.

We all have our vices, Duffy said, smiling at the smell of Earl Grey tea coming from the mug. So, are you ready to, what were the captains words again? Step aboard history?

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Gomez snickered, but only good-naturedly. Captain David Gold was an even-tempered man who rarely allowed his emotions free rein. But the news that the da Vinci crew had been assigned to recover the Defiant had sent the captain into a near fit of excite-ment. History, mystery, and legend all converged on the area of space the da Vinci was rapidly approach-ing, and Gold had made no apologies for wanting to be the first one there.

He hasnt been this keyed up for a mission in a long time, has he? Gomez asked. Hes acting like an

ensign on his first assignment. But to answer your question, were ready. The captains been at my side almost every minute since the initial briefing. She grinned mischievously. I did manage to shake him, though.

And your lucky successor was?

Why, Carol, of course. Shes got her hands full dealing with our Tholian escorts, but I dont think its helping with the captain talking into one ear while she listens to the Tholians with the other.

As the teams intercultural relations specialist, it fell to Carol Abramowitz to guide them through the delicate dealings with the Tholian vessel that had greeted them at the Federation border to escort them through Tholian space. Things had been touchy at first, with Captain Gold exercising more care and diplomacy than was normal even for him. Given the Tholians

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penchant for requiring utmost precision and adherence to protocol, however, it made sense to enlist Abramowitzs expertise and greater grasp of Tholian idiosyncrasies.

Oh, and I imagine theyre a chatty bunch, those guys, Duffy said. Maybe I could tell them the one about the Tholian, the Leyron dabo girl, and the tuning fork? Noting the lack of amusement in Gomezs expression, Duffy grinned and took a sip of his drink.

Uh, maybe not.

Not retreating into humor now, are we? she asked.

Meaning?

Gomez stared at him until he met her gaze.

Meaning are you avoiding thoughts of what were supposed to do here?

Sonnie, Im begging you, Duffy deadpanned as he grasped her free hand, dont take the mission. How will I ever explain to the kids why Mommy never comes home for dinner anymore? You and your dare-devil plans. You dont see the looks I get from the other guys at the tongo club every week. He gave her a grin.

Ha ha, Gomez said as she took back her hand.

Pardon me for trying to connect with you.

Okay, no more wise guy, Duffy said. What would you have me say? Of course Ive run through all the scenarios in my head and yes, Im nervous for you . . .

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for every one of you who are beaming over to the Defiant during interphase. But whatever works out . . .

here, well, I think we've both been around long enough to know the risks and costs to our personal lives.

The admission, uncertain yet heartfelt as it was, caught Gomez completely off guard. How long had it been since she and Duffy had talked, really talked, like this?

Her giggle came from nowhere, and Gomez found herself abruptly covering her mouth, struggling to keep her composure from dissolving completely. It was too late, though, as she saw Duffy's expression fall.

Kieran, you're sweet, she said, choosing her words carefully. But that wasn't what I meant at all. Duffy straightened in his chair, the brush-off stinging him almost as much as it used to back on the Enterprise. Determined to save the moment, he quickly fumbled for a witty retort.

Oh, well, this has got to be the first time in my life I've misunderstood a woman's intentions. Was it enough of a cover?

He should have known better.

It seems we have a new issue on the table. Gomez drew a breath only to giggle again, but quickly rallied to maintain her bearing. I can't say I haven't missed this kind of talk with you, but we really don't have

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time to get into this right now. Can we put it in stasis for the time being?

Consider it frozen, he said, almost too quickly.

For now, he added to himself.

The pause in their conversation threatened to become too long, but then Gomez pressed forward.

What I wanted to know was how you're planning for your end of the mission.

Duffy shrugged again and sipped from his glass, hoping to avoid looking Gomez directly in the eye. He felt certain that, had she looked hard enough, she would see through to the doubt he hid within him. He hoped to sound nonchalant. Seems pretty cut and-

A tone from the da Vincis communications system interrupted him, followed by Captain Gold's voice. All senior officers and mission specialists to the briefing room. Were approaching the rendezvous point.

You were saying? Gomez asked as they both rose from the table and headed out of the mess hall.

Oh. It seems pretty cut and dried, he finished as they proceeded down the corridor. You guys have the

hard part in prepping the Defiant. Im just minding the store.

But thats just it, Kieran. Gomez dropped her voice, a tone Duffy knew she used when she wanted his full attention. He obliged, pausing in his step.

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Its not standard procedure for the captain and me to be off the ship at the same time. We both know that the da Vincis center seat is not where you want to be. For the second time in their conversation, Duffy hoped that his wince was more internal than external. During his time on the da Vinci, Duffy had worked his way up the chain of command, earning the confidence of Captain Gold to the point of his being recognized as third in line to the big chair. But that line had never stretched so far as to put him in command during an actual S.C.E. mission. Duffy had taken the conn on a few occasions, his previous one lasting less than an hour as Captain Gold accompanied Sonya to a debriefing on Starbase 42. When he was in charge, Duffy himself had joked, the da Vinci might as well be on autopilot.

Ive never even recorded a captains log entry. Duffy shifted on his feet as Gomezs words hung in the air. Everyone on the da Vinci saw Duffy as a light-hearted but skilled officer, one who led more by example than authority. It was an image he had worked hard to project. He never wanted to be one of those engineers who thought he knew a ship better than its captain did. He didnt sit at his station on the bridge, secretly hoping for a catastrophe or crisis that might place him in the center seat.

Was his attitude merely avoidance? Or was it fear?

Even he didnt want to plumb for the answers to

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those questions, at least not now, lest he wonder whether Captain Golds confidence in his abilities was warranted.

You know that Im in this whole thing for the puzzle, Sonnie. I like cracking the nut, coming up with answers in the nick of time, and doing what Im told. He paused to swallow, maybe a bit too hard. Captain Gold told me that Im sitting in command on this end, so thats what Im going to do. Ill be fine.

You dont have to say that for my benefit, Kieran. I know you will. Gomez reached out to give his hand a squeeze. I just want to be sure you know you will. The big red button on the chair fires the phasers, right? He smiled at her generous laugh, which put



him more at ease. Thanks, boss.

Gomez dropped his hand and walked toward the briefing rooms door, turning her head just enough so Duffy could hear her whisper.

You know, Im liking the sound of that boss stuff more and more.

He followed her into the room and saw that, save one other, the meeting was waiting on them. Then he felt a small shove against his calf.

Excuse please, many pardons, P8 Blue said as she pushed her hard-skinned form almost between his legs. Skittering in on all eight limbs as she was wont to do when hurried, the Nasat then shot up to her hind legs and walked to her specially designed seat at

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the tables end opposite Captain Gold.

You may begin now, she said to Gold, who smirked at Duffy and gestured him to the remaining seat with a nod of his head.

Once everyone was settled, the captain said, Thank you all for your efforts these past hours, and for indulging my hands-on curiosity. Im sure its obvious to you that Ive more than a passing interest in our rescue of the Defiant. Commander Gomez, let me reit-erate that this is your mission. You have the final say as to whether I beam over with you or stay here and direct things on this end.

Duffy almost laughed aloud at the thought of Sonya actually telling the captain he should sit this one out. Sir, Gomez began, Im counting on your knowl-edge of that class of starship to help once we get there. Youre hardly just a sightseer, and Im going to put you to work.

In other words, no putzing around, Gold said, laughing.

With a final gesture to Gomez, Gold said, Lead us through the final check, if you would, Commander. Gomez turned to glance up and down the table as she spoke. Well, weve already covered the historical and political aspects of this mission with Captain Scott. Now its time to get down to the nitty-gritty. She looked over at P8 Blue. Pattie, why dont you bring us up to speed on what were facing.

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Consulting her padd, the Nasat said, Everything we have gathered through long-range scans corrob-orates the data provided by the Tholians. The Defiant, for all intents and purposes, exists simulta-neously within our universe and another. The ship is

drifting in a rift between the two. As it moves in and out of this rift, it appears to lose molecular cohesion. Consoles, deck plates, everything on the ship gives up its physical qualities in one universe to regain them in the other. We will have to exercise extreme caution while moving around over there. I cannot be more precise, as this is as much as I have been able to determine from the data available to us. Many pardons.

That's fine for now, Pattie. Gomez turned her gaze to the ship's chief medical officer. Dr. Lense, just what is this going to do to us physically?

Elizabeth Lense leaned forward in her chair. I've reviewed the medical logs from the Enterprise and determined that we have two issues to deal with. First, those of us on the Defiant will get the full experience of interphase, which is sure to bring on nausea and dizziness, muscle weakness and slowed response times to all outside stimuli.

Duffy couldn't help himself. Sounds like what happened to me after breakfast.

Ignoring Duffy, Lense did not even give him the satisfaction of an irritated look. Based on what I

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learned from the Enterprise logs, the humanoids among us on both ships have an added concern. Our proximity to the area of interphase puts us at risk for irregular, paranoid and ultimately psychotic behavior, something we might as well call space madness.

Lense glanced at Duffy, as if she expected him to chime in again. He held his tongue as she rose from the table.

Dr. McCoy believed it was this condition that killed the Defiant's crew, but he was able to develop a counteragent to the interphase's effects on his ship, one that my team has already begun to administer to our crew. She held up a hypospray. I can give all of you your first inoculations now, if that's not an interruption, Commander.

With Gomez nodding assent, Lense rose from her chair and walked first to Duffy and placed the hypospray to his neck.

He leaned to one side and asked, So what's in this stuff, Doc?

Lense grinned slightly, thumbing the hypo before answering Duffy's hanging question. Through the hiss of the spray, she said simply, Theragen.

Duffy's eyes widened in shock and he slapped his hand to his neck, nearly toppling his chair over in his haste to scramble to his feet.

What? That stuffs pure poison! Basic Starfleet combat history was rife with accounts of 23rd

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Century Klingon biochemical warfare and their use of theragen as a nerve gas, one quickly and painfully deadly to humans. Not an honorable way to fight a foe, Duffy believed, but times were different then. Gold laughed aloud, as did Gomez and the others in the room. Mr. Duffy, Dr. Lense has assured me that its merely a derivative. Its perfectly safe and may even carry a slight intoxicating effect.

Thats correct, Lense added. Her right eyebrow rose in an almost Vulcan fashion as she added, Dr. McCoy also saw fit to include a recipe for mixing the counteragent with Scotch, based apparently on field testing by the ships engineer, whom we all know, of course. The doctors deadpan delivery evoked another chorus of laughs from the group.

Well, if its good enough for Captain Scott, Duffy said, far be it from me to say no to a nip of the hard stuff, Doc. He tried to laugh it off but his adrenaline needed another moment to simmer.

As Lense made her way around the others, she paused at P8 Blues seat. Pattie, I want to monitor the interphases effects on you before your inoculation. I dont think the theragen is necessary.

I will report any irregularities at once, Doctor. Satisfied with Lenses report, Gomez turned her attention back to the group. So those of us headed to the Defiant are ready. The plan is for Soloman and me to install a series of portable generators to the

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Defiants systems, as shes sure to be completely drained of power. It wont restore full functionality, but we should be able to activate the maneuvering thrusters and gain limited control of some shipboard systems. Pattie will verify the ships systems to make sure they can handle the power and prepare ships thrusters to help coax us out of the rift, assuming they will still work.

Dr. Lense, your job is to keep an eye on us and gather what data you can on the physiological effects of the interphase phenomenon. The physician con-firmed the instructions with a single nod.

Captain, I need you to get whatever information you can from the Defiants logs and pass anything to me that might help us.

Thats hardly an order, Commander, said Gold and smiled. You have no idea how much I want to

hear the answers to our questions about the Defiant in the words of Captain Blair himself.

She then turned to Duffy. Commander, what have you got for me?

He almost stammered, knowing she playfully chose those words to catch him off guard before the whole team. It went a long way toward calming the fresh wave of butterflies that had formed in his gut.

I wish I could say were going to be as busy as your team. Weve modified the da Vincis tractor beam to work in conjunction with a molecular stabilizing

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beam emitted from our navigational deflector. The specs come from Starfleet, and all of our computer models match what we were told to expect from them. Captain Scott worked on the calculations him-self, and he hasnt let us down before. Were good to go, Commander.

Gomez smiled just enough for him to take it personally, then turned to the ships cultural liaison.

Carol, whats your take on the Tholians at this point?

Carol Abramowitz shrugged her shoulders just a bit as she drew in a breath. This is my first time dealing with a Tholian who wasnt a training holo-gram.

My contact on the Tholian ship is curt bordering on rude, guarded with information beyond any specific requests, and quite snippy when I dont report regularly and precisely according to his timetable. She shrugged. In other words, business as usual.

Gomez stifled a snicker. We all appreciate your extreme patience here, Carol. Your role in keeping the Tholians calm and informed on our actions is as important as anything any of us will be doing. I might sug-

A tone from the comm system silenced Gomez and Lieutenant Commander Domenica Corsis voice followed it from the speakers.

Captain Gold? This is ahead of schedule, but were

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in visual range of the rendezvous point.

Gold answered, Were on our way. Duffy turned to catch the captains eyes widening and a hint of a grin creeping across his mouth.

Duffy was one of the first to step onto the bridge, only to stop in his tracks and fixate on the da Vincis main viewer. A pair of hands on his shoulders guided him to one side and without looking he could tell the

touch was Sonyas. At any other time he might have reacted or commented on her touch, but his attention was riveted to the viewscreen and the captivating image cast upon it.

The area of torn space itself was unremarkable, unless one stopped to notice that no stars shone there. What seized Duffy was the shimmering lines and apparition-like form of the starship drifting with-in the rift, hanging askew in relation to the da Vinci, with the top of its primary hull flat enough to clearly read the dead ships name and registry number U.S.S. Defiant, NCC-1764.

The low number bespoke the antiquated status the vessel held, Duffy knew. Here was a vision straight out of history, a physical manifestation of the challenges and adventures that had more than likely inspired every member of the da Vincis crew to enter Starfleet and see what mysteries the universe held for them-selves.

The electric-blue glow infusing the century-old star-36

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ship bathed the da Vincis bridge and the dozen or so people gathered there. As they watched, the Defiant continued to fade and solidify, winking in and out of existence.

As far as this universe is concerned, thought Duffy, the Defiant is both real and unreal.

Sensor scans are inconclusive, Corsi said as she vacated the command chair, but readings indicate she hasnt been there too long. We cant confirm any power sources or atmosphere. She directed a wry smile toward Gomez. Id watch my step if I were you, Commander.

Away team, to the transporter room, Gold said.

Its time to go to work. Mr. Duffy, you have the conn. Take care of my ship.

The order from Captain Gold raised a chill on Duffys skin, but one fueled by responsibility, not alarm. His attention turned to Gomez as she and the others moved toward the turbolift. His eyes found hers as she smiled just a bit and held his gaze.

Just for her, Duffy puffed out his chest and winked.

As the doors closed, Duffy blew out a long breath.

For better or worse, the bridge was his.

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As the transporter beam released her, Sonya Gomez experienced a momentary feeling of weightlessness before the magnetic locks of her boots pulled her back to the deck.

No gravity, she said, confirming her suspicions that many of the Defiants systems would be off-line or

without power. That was to be expected, of course. Not even considering that the ship had been out here for over a century, log reports from the Enterprise had described the draining effects of the rift on their own power systems. It made sense that after so many years, the unprotected Defiant would have ultimately succumbed to the influence of spatial interphase. The only illumination in the engineering section

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was that provided by the helmets of the five away-team members environment suits. As powerful as they were, the lamps didnt do enough to drive away the enveloping darkness of the large chamber for Gomez's taste. Dust and dirt floated all around them, free from the restraint of gravity. It gave the room a murky feel that Gomez likened to disturbed silt on an ocean floor.

What was that? Gold called out, detecting movement from the corner of his eye and jerking around in response. As his helmet lamp shone on the source of the movement, he felt bile rise in his throat.

Drifting unencumbered in the open space of the cavernous chamber was a skeleton, what Gold presumed to be the remains of a Defiant engineer. It still wore the black pants and red shirt common to engineering and security personnel on Federation star-ships in the 2260s, though the boots that completed the uniform had fallen away from the skeleton's feet. No doubt they were still floating elsewhere about the room.

Oh my God, the captain whispered.

Captain, there's something else, Lense added, her tricorder beeping in her hand. The majority of what we see floating around us isn't dirt or dust. It's what's left of the decomposed bodies of the people who died in this compartment. I'm picking up similar readings throughout the ship.

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Gomez shuddered at the thought of maneuvering through the interior of this dead ship, the remains of its crew floating all about her, stepping through it and having it settle on her suit as she walked. She had prepared herself to deal with looking at the bodies of dead crewmen during the mission, even decomposed ones. This unanticipated twist, however, made an already tense and depressing situation even more morose.

Perhaps sensing the pall that had been cast over the

room by their discovery, Gold said, If we werent sure why we came here, then we should be now. He indi-cated the drifting skeleton. If nothing else, our job is to make sure that these men and women finally get to go home.

Only trace amounts of oxygen in the atmosphere, Gomez said as she consulted her tricorder. We wont be able to work without our suits if we cant restore life support.

Gold nodded. The ships been out here a long time, so theres no telling what long-term effects the rift had on her. Plus, we dont know what shes been exposed to on the other side of the rift.

Perhaps the ships computer . . . recorded data received by automatic sensors before power . . . was lost, Soloman said. Formerly known as 110, the Bynar had changed his name after finally coming to terms with the tragic loss of his mate, 111, during an

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earlier mission.

110 had wrestled with the question of whether or not to return to his home planet and seek out another mate, but had finally decided against it. No other would ever be able to replace the one with whom he had shared so much. So rather than do something that would, in his eyes at least, diminish the memory of his lifes love, 110 elected to remain with the da Vinci. But a Bynar without a mate was not a normal occurrence and by remaining unbonded, the use of his designation would not have been proper. 110 therefore decided that a new mode of address was needed. Captain Gold had inadvertently provided that by referring to the Bynars unique status as a solo man.

Well have time to examine the computer records later, Gomez said. But first we have to get some power back into this old girl. She activated her suits communicator. Gomez to da Vinci.

Da Vinci. Duffy here.

Kieran, everythings clear here. Send over our equipment.

Aye, aye, Commander. Stand by.

A few seconds passed before transporter energy flared into existence and a group of cargo containers materialized. Equipped with magnetic locks, each crate remained on the deck instead of floating freely.

In addition to the collection of tools and instruments

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she had insisted on for the mission, Gomezs expres-sion

brightened at the sight of the five portable generators. How did you manage the fifth one? she asked Duffy. She could almost hear the smile coming over the comm circuit as he replied.

Hey, an engineer isn't supposed to reveal all of his secrets. At least, that's what Captain Scott always says.

When Duffy had asked about her equipment needs for the away team, Gomez had decided that four of the generators would probably be sufficient for their plans, but five would be better. It had been necessary to outfit each of the devices with special shielding to protect them from the detrimental effects of the rift, a time-consuming procedure. That Duffy had expended the extra effort to prepare a fifth generator, especially with the limited amount of time he had to complete his original tasks, pleased Gomez to no end. She was thankful to have the added cushion, just in case.

Well, thanks just the same. Dinners on me when we get back. Gomez out.

As she severed the connection, Gomez noticed P8 Blue studying her tricorder, a frown creasing her face. Pattie, is something wrong?

Looking up, the Nasat replied, I have detected an anomalous reading. It appears to be a shielded power source. The indication is very faint, but it is there.

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Where is it? Gomez asked.

Deck 20, portside cargo hold.

Frowning, Gold said, Odd place for a power reading on an otherwise dead ship. Why didn't we detect it from the da Vinci?

Gomez turned so that her helmet lamps cast illumination past the heavy mesh grating separating the main engineering deck from the ship's massive impulse engines. She found it an odd sensation to stand in the heart of a starship and not hear the comforting hum and feel the pulse of the vessel's engines.

The silence only seemed to strengthen the aura of death surrounding her.

The rift might be acting as a kind of dampening field, she said. The Enterprise logs detail how they were unable to get worthwhile sensor readings, also. She turned to Pattie. You didn't find other power sources anywhere on the ship?

The Nasat shook her head. I am sorry, no. The warp core is completely inert and will require a cold restart to bring it back on line.

No, thank you, Gomez countered. After a hundred years, I'm not doing anything with those engines



until they've been thoroughly checked out, preferably by a starbase dry-dock crew. Our first order of business is restoring partial power, enough to maneuver us out of the rift. We'll also try to get enough power to the main computer and access the databanks containing log entries.

The best place to accomplish that is the science officers library computer station on the main bridge, Gold said. I can have Mr. Duffy transmit the Defiants prefix code from the Starfleet tactical database and give me direct access to the whole shebang.

Gomez wasn't sure who had come up with the idea behind the prefix code, which allowed a ship commander to assume remote control of another starship by establishing a link between the vessels computers. It had proven to be a tactical advantage on certain isolated occasions, she knew, but she was convinced it provided a much greater use for engineers, especially those sent into an abandoned or derelict ship such as the Defiant had unfortunately become. Once the code gave Captain Gold access to the ships main computer, he would be able to retrieve anything contained within its vast memory banks, including secured sections containing Captain Blairs personal log.

But you'll have to get there the hard way, sir, Gomez told Gold. I won't be able to spare enough power to access the turbolift control network. She looked around the immense engineering chamber. They built these old Constitutions tough enough, but their original duotronic systems were never intended for exclusive automation.

Dr. Richard Daystrom did attempt to . . . rectify  
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that shortcoming, Soloman said, but his multitronic computer project was . . . a failure.

That's certainly an understatement, Gold replied. He remembered reading how Daystroms lauded attempt to follow up his revolutionary duotronic computer systems had ended in fiery tragedy. During an experiment in which the original Enterprise had been outfitted with Daystroms prototype multitronic system, the M-5, the new computer had experienced massive malfunction. After locking the Enterprise crew out of the ships critical systems, M-5 took the vessel on a murderous rampage. It had ended with the near destruction of four other Constitution-class starships and the deaths of nearly a thousand Starfleet personnel.

Well, were not out to automate the Defiant, Gomez said. We just want to be able to generate enough thrust to help the da Vinci pull us out of the rift, if necessary. Besides, I dont like the idea of not being able to move under our own power if the need arises.

She turned back to P8 Blue. Pattie, I want you to check out that power reading on Deck 20. Take Dr. Lense with you.

Lense looked up at that. Commander, I was hoping to investigate sickbay and see if the ships doctor recorded any useful information about the physiological effects of interphase on the crew.

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Shaking her head, Gomez replied, I havent forgot-ten about you, Doctor, but Id rather not have Pattie roaming the ship alone until youre certain the rift wont have any adverse effects on her. Besides, any-thing the Defiants doctor recorded will be accessible from the bridge.

Having stepped away from the team to consult his tricorder, which Duffy had prepared by downloading the technical schematics of the Defiant into it, Gold looked up and asked, All the way from engineering to the bridge by way of the Jefferies tubes? The smile he directed to Lense was good-natured enough, though. Oy, I guess I should have seen that one coming. Well, at any rate, the good doctor here will be thrilled to see me get my weeks exercise quotient during this mis-sion.

\* \* \*

The access panel opened with minimal effort on his part, swinging away to be swallowed by the darkness beyond the hole it revealed. David Gold directed the illumination from his helmet lamps through the opening, becoming the first person in over a century to gaze on the abandoned bridge of the U.S.S. Defiant. Hed toured the Constitution-class starship that was interred at the Fleet Museum several times, of course. With its display placards and directional signs to guide visitors, however, the vessel on exhibit had seemed to be exactly that; an elegant mock-up rather

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than a functional ship of the line. This was different, much different.

The consoles, the turbolift doors, the railing surrounding the command well, everything was infused with bright colors that were only slightly diminished by the layer of dust covering everything. It was a striking contrast to the bridge of the da Vinci and other

ships on which he had served. By current Federation standards, the Defiants systems were hopelessly out-dated, but Gold could see in the archaic equipment how the various systems had evolved over the century separating this ship from her modern-day descendants.

He could almost feel the history of the era from which this vessel hailed wash over him.

Gold to Gomez, he said as he activated his communicator.

I've made it to the bridge. What's the status on power?

Almost there, Captain, Gomez said over the connection.

Soloman should have the main computer online a few minutes after that.

Excellent, the captain said as he stepped from the access crawlway onto the starboard side of the upper deck next to the main viewscreen. His boots made a satisfying clank as their magnetic seals attached him to the deck.

As with engineering, thick dust hung in the air. At least, that's how Gold preferred to think of it. The bridge appeared deserted, but he knew better. Hed

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read the reports filed by Captain Kirk on their investigation of the Defiant and so was prepared when his light fell on the two skeletal bodies floating near the bridges far bulkhead.

Gold figured the skeleton swathed in the gold shirt was the decomposed body of the ship's commander, Captain Blair, the golden braids on the sleeves of the dust-coated, century-old uniform shirt providing the only hint. The other skeleton wore a red shirt, with no other clues to its wearer's identity.

Gold idly wondered where the rest of the bridge crew might have gone. Did they abandon their posts while in the grips of the madness brought on by the interphase phenomenon? Were they lying somewhere, their fallen bodies bearing silent witness to the carnage that had eventually overtaken the rest of the crew? Gold was surprised to feel himself shiver at the thought.

And then he nearly had a heart attack when the lights came on.

Gottenyu! The exclamation burst from his lips as the overhead lighting snapped on and consoles all across the room began their various start-up sequences. True to her word, Gomez had restored power to the bridge. Life flowed through the Defiant's nerve center once more.

Gomez to Captain Gold, the engineer's voice sounded in his helmet. You should have power

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restored up there.

Gold sighed as he chuckled to himself. Thank you, Commander. Now I just need a moment to get my own power source restarted.

In a few more minutes Ill have life support restored to that deck, Captain, Gomez said. Itll make working up there easier and allow us to con-serve the oxygen supplies in our suits.

Taking another look at the bodies of Captain Blair and the unknown crewman hovering in the absence of gravity, Golds expression sobered, though there was no one around to see it. The restoration of the Defiants normal atmosphere was sure to have a debil-itating effect on any decomposed remains exposed to it.

Stand fast on that for the moment, Commander, and send Soloman up to the bridge at his earliest opportunity. We have one task to complete before we get started.

The mission, Gold decided, could wait. Captain Blair and his crew deserved at least that much.

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Deep in the bowels of the Defiant, Dr. Lense and P8 Blue succeeded in forcing open the reinforced double hatch. Unlike most of the other doors they had encountered on their journey from the ships engi-neering section, this one had proven more difficult to get past. That wasnt surprising, considering its dou-ble thickness and magnetic seal designed to hold even in the event of a ship-wide power loss.

It was also heavy.

Thats some door, Lense said, accentuating the fact.

It has to be, Pattie replied as she retrieved the manual opener from the surface of the door. In the event of an explosive decompression in the cargo bay,

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this door is the only thing separating the rest of the ship from vacuum. This class of ship was in service long before automatic safety forcefields became com-mon.

They are strong, but not too strong for us. She hefted the door opener one last time before returning it to its carrying pouch on her belt. Normally used in emergency situations, the device was also one of the many helpful implements employed by engineers on starships to carry out their normal range of duties. It

was a standard component of every S.C.E. team members tool kit.

Lense to away team, the doctor said into her communicator. We have arrived at the cargo bay. Understood, Gomez replied. Be careful in there. Theres nothing that says a hatch or two cant fail unexpectedly if the ship is tossed around by the rift.

Lense directed a questioning look at Pattie, who shrugged in reply. It has been known to occur on derelict vessels.

Wonderful, the doctor sighed. Lets just get this over with.

As with the rest of the ship that they had traversed so far, this area of the Defiant was devoid of any appreciable atmosphere and was wrapped in dark-ness.

Getting here from engineering hadnt been the most pleasant of journeys, either, as they had been forced to walk past more skeletal remains of

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crewmembers drifting in the zero gravity as well as the particles and residue saturating the air. Though Lense was a physician and used to seeing bodies in all manner of decomposition, she would be more than happy to return to the da Vinci and its quite living crew.

The pair swept the immense chamber with their helmet lamps, chasing the black away as the illumination shone across the bizarre sight of cargo containers drifting freely about the chamber. Dust littered the air as well, further hampering their vision, and in some instances the grime covered shipping labels and other markings on various containers.

Patties eyes widened as one reading on her tricorder changed. I have located the anomalous power source. She pointed off into the depths of the cargo bay. That way.

With Lense following, Pattie stepped cautiously into the hold, her attention riveted on the information being relayed by her tricorder as the pair continued past containers and other equipment. While some of it was still strapped to the deck or fastened to storage shelves, the majority of the rooms contents floated about the room free of any restraint.

Inspecting the label on one container, Lense shook her head. This one is full of replacement components for computer workstations. She pointed to another. That one has parts for engineering control systems.

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This stuff could fill a museum exhibit. Perhaps it will, one day, Pattie said as she continued to consult her tricorder. Starfleet may see fit to honor the Defiants crew by interring the ship in the Fleet Museum as part of a memorial. Such an action would seem appropriate. She turned a corner and headed toward the bays far bulkhead. Moving in and around more drifting containers and components, the insect-like engineering specialist abruptly stopped. This is it, she said simply. It was an understatement. Unlike the drab gray square and rectangular containers dominating the rest of the cargo hold, the object Pattie and Lense now beheld was octagonal in shape and painted in a dark black that shone through the thick dust covering it. Pattie guessed that the object was half again as long as a Starfleet standard quantum torpedo tube while being nearly twice as wide. Secured to the deck with restraining bands, the item sat atop a suite of six stocky legs. Bending down near one end of the squat device, Pattie waved her tricorder over one of the legs.

Soil residue, she said as she examined the units readings. Whatever it is, it was intended for use on the surface of a planet or moon.

Lense wiped dust from the surface of the object, looking for some clue to its origin or purpose. There doesn't seem to be any external markings. Do you

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have any idea what it might be?

Components of this device look similar to technology possessed by the Tholians, Pattie said. Or at least the configurations carry basic Tholian tenets of design. She pointed to one of the object's eight side panels. These appear to be energy emitters of some kind. She shook her head. It is remarkable that its power cell is still functioning after all this time, and despite the debilitating effects of the rift. We may be able to learn something useful about the protective aspects of its internal shielding.

Lense frowned as she studied the squat device. No means of propulsion, nothing that appears to be a weapon. What could it be?

For that, Pattie had no answer. Lense mentally filed their exchange among her reminders as to why she preferred medical science to engineering. At least her patients could assist in their own diagnoses.

\* \* \*

Sitting at the engineering station on the bridge of the Defiant, Sonya Gomez couldn't deny the feeling that she'd stepped backward into history.

As she ran her hands along the glossy black console and let her fingers trace over the rows of multicolored buttons, she realized how Captain Gold had been enamored with the idea of boarding this vessel. The sensation had begun to assert itself earlier, down in the engineering section, but it was nothing compared

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to what she had felt when she set foot on the bridge. Her trained eyes had inspected every station, every control, and come away impressed. The design of the Defiants nerve center, like many of the systems she had seen so far on the ship, were ones that held up surprisingly well despite the gap in technology they represented. She had been very satisfied with what she had found in engineering.

So you're saying they'll hold together? Gold asked, a childlike grin dominating his features.

Gomez nodded. Most definitely, sir. The main thrusters are operating well within acceptable parameters, even though they've been out of commission for a century. It'll be more than enough to help the da Vinci pull us out if necessary. They certainly knew how to build these old ships.

In addition to restoring power to the thrusters, Gomez had also returned power and life support to the bridge, allowing the away team to remove their environment-suit helmets. Of course, Gold had let her activate the automatic air scrubbers first, while he and Soloman had taken the time to remove the remains of Captain Blair and the unknown crewman he had found on the bridge. Gomez for one had been thankful for that. During the time it had taken her and Soloman to install the generators, they had encountered more skeletons of the engineering crew. The ghastly sight had begun to unnerve her more

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than she wanted to admit.

Captain, Soloman said from where he sat at the science station, I have obtained access . . . to the ship's main computer. We now have access to the entire data storage network, including the . . . captain's logs.

Excellent, Gold replied. Maybe now we can finally find out what happened to this ship. See if you can find anything in the logs about the rift. He paused for a moment before adding, Or Tholians, while you're at it. Noticing Gomez's questioning look, the captain shrugged. A hunch.

She turned to watch Soloman set to his task. Bynars

as a race interacted with computers as easily as humans conversed with one another. On their home planet, the central computer system was highly regarded throughout the Federation as one of the pinnacles of information processing capability. Like others of his species, Soloman was used to computers possessing far greater power and speed than those of a century-old starship.

Despite his best efforts, however, Soloman was still adjusting to working as a lone entity, rather than being able to divide responsibilities with his bond-mate. In the weeks following 111's tragic death, Soloman had at times found himself confused, hesitant, even resistant to the idea of working alone. Tasks once regarded as routine while working in tandem

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with 111 suddenly seemed insurmountable. Gomez knew that it had taken no small amount of courage to rise to the challenge of continuing on without 111's support. That was one of the things she admired about the Bynar.

She also wondered idly if Soloman would experience any additional frustration at being forced to deal with the Defiants antiquated equipment. The commander couldn't suppress a smile at the image of the Bynar throwing up his hands in exasperation and loudly announcing his refusal to work under such intolerable conditions.

Soloman did no such thing, of course. Instead, he turned back to Gold after only a few moments of scanning the Defiants computer records.

Captain, I believe I have found . . . what we are looking for. He keyed a series of controls and was rewarded with the main viewers activation. The image on the screen coalesced into the figure of a human male who Gold recognized as Captain Thomas Blair.

Captain's log stardate 5684.7. Sensors have detected a trio of Tholian vessels on an intercept course. We can outrun them, but long-range scans indicate other ships in the region. We are plotting an evasive course to get us back to Federation space. The area we're traveling through is uncharted, but sensors have detected nothing that might present a threat to the ship.

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Little did he know what he would find, Gold said as the image froze.

Gomez nodded knowingly. Our sensors have trouble detecting the rift, and we have better equipment



and know what to look for. The Defiant never had a chance. She could almost feel her blood chill as she regarded the image of Captain Blair. After studying the mans service record during the journey here, Gold had mentioned that Blair had been about fifty standard Earth years old at the time of his command. But the log entry made the Defiant captain look older still.

From the science station, Soloman said, Captain, there is more.

Lets have the whole megillah, then, Gold replied. After a brief pause, the image of Captain Blair reappeared. Captains log supplemental. The ship has come into contact with an unidentified phenomenon unlike any-thing on record. Science Officer Nyn believes it to be some kind of interdimensional corridor that may actually connect our universe with a completely different one. In addition to affecting our onboard power systems, Dr. Hamilton reports that members of the crew are being struck with what she describes as a frantic paranoia. Her medical scans show that in all of the victims, an area of the brain has been affected in a similar fashion. She hasnt isolated the cause yet, but the

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attacks didnt start until we entered this rift. We need to leave this place, but our sensors cant seem to detect an exit from this hole in space weve fallen into.

In the next entry, Gold and the others could now clearly see the exhaustion and near panic on Blairs face.

The incidents of unrest are escalating, both in number and violence. Four crewmen have been killed and Dr. Hamilton was severely injured when she was attacked by one of her own nurses. Without her help, I dont think well be able to find a cure for whatever is affecting the crew. Science Officer Nyn is unable to find a way out of this rift. We have been pulled into and out of our universe on three separate occasions, but in each instance we were unable to break free from whatever is holding us here. Nyn has a plan to-

On the screen, a crewman wearing a red shirt suddenly lurched into the picture, his hands lunging for Blairs throat. The captain bolted from his chair to parry the attack, but the crewman had the advantage in both speed and strength.

Oh my God, Gomez breathed. Like Gold and Soloman, she too was transfixed by what quickly became mortal combat on the viewscreen, with Captain Blair fighting futilely against the onslaught of the obviously crazed crewman. None of the away

team could bring themselves to speak another word as the struggle continued onscreen.

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Finally, Captain Thomas Blair succumbed to the greater strength of his opponent, his body sagging in defeat before he and the crewman fell out of view. The log entry continued to play, the only thing discernible being the unpleasant sounds of struggle continuing out of range of the log recorders visual pickup. That only lasted for a few moments, though, before it mercifully ended.

Soloman was the first to speak, his voice quiet and tentative. They never had a chance . . . trapped in the rift as they were. What a tragedy.

That explains why Starfleet never learned what happened to the Defiant, Gomez said. First they were hiding from the Tholians, probably maintaining communications silence. Then they fell into the rift with no hope of getting a signal out. And the Enterprise never had the chance to review the captains logs. She paused momentarily, gathering her composure when she realized how profoundly the images on the viewer had affected her.

What a terrible way to die.

Gold nodded. Well, we mustnt let our emotions get the better of us. There will be plenty of time later to answer all the questions the Defiant and her crew have left us. For now the best thing to do is to concentrate on getting the old girl out of this mess and heading home.

Gomez agreed, upset with herself at allowing what

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they had encountered to bother her. It wasnt normal for her to react in such a manner to the unexpected or the unpleasant. Why should now be any different? Her attention was drawn to the chirping sound of their suit communicators and the voice of P8 Blue. Captain Gold, we have found the source of the power readings, the Nasat said. I think you will find this to be most interesting.

Gold couldnt help a small smile as he replied.

What on this ship isnt?

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Despite the reports from the Enterprise and from his own colleagues-reports of lunacy and bloodshed that he supplemented with horrific images in his own mind-Duffy could not look upon the Defiant as a dead ship anymore.

His eyes surveyed the century-old starships glowing image on the da Vincis main viewer. Hanging silently in space, the all but powerless craft shimmered in its eerie blue shroud, more of a specter than a starship. Duffy propped himself against the bridge railing, vaguely recalling stories of ancient sailors on Earths seas and their reports of phantom schooners sailing not on the waves but in the skies. Had more people the same opportunity to view this hapless ship as did

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he and the da Vincis crew, he thought, the Defiant surely would become the stuff of legend.

But the surreal ship now housed very real members of his own crew, whose mission was to restore life to the Defiant. At least, they were to restore enough of it to allow his team to pluck the ship from more than a century of interspatial limbo.

If nothing else, well bring home some answers to questions that have baffled Starfleet officers for decades, including Captain Gold.

As he thought of his captain, Duffy swung his glance to the empty command chair in the center of the da Vincis bridge. Technically in command of the vessel for almost three hours, Duffy still had not brought himself to sit in that chair. When he wasnt working, he lingered around it, appraising it as he used to size up the antique sofa in his grandmothers home as a child. Every holiday, his family would take the shuttle to Denver for a big meal and overnight stay. During each visit Duffy would find a way to sneak into the sitting room and plop down on that rickety sofa when no one was looking, just to know that he did it. Duffy smiled to himself as he eyed the seat cushion of the captains chair. His little game dulled some of the tension in his mind.

Hey, Grandma, take a look at little Kieran now, he thought as he sauntered over to the chair, turned around, bent his knees and-

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Mr. Duffy, called Fabian Stevens from one of the science stations at the rear of the bridge. Ive got the latest structural integrity readings from Commander Gomez if you want to see how they fit the models. Duffys rear hung over the seat for a moment before he straightened and wondered if Grandma had been watching after all.

Fabian Stevens was the one crewman on the da Vinci who Duffy had the most fun with, whether it

was knocking back a synthebeer in the mess hall or puzzling out the answer to a technical problem.

Stevens struck Duffy as, for lack of a better term, the most regular guy on board. He had also confided to Duffy his own personal interest in this mission as the da Vinci sped through Tholian space.

The tactical experts assignment previous to S.C.E. had been to Deep Space Nine and its attending star-ship, which bore the same class designation and name of the very ship they intended to salvage. Upon receiving that posting, Stevens had studied with keen interest the logs and history of the original Defiant and had been caught up in the mystery and tragedy surrounding the vessels loss. As an engineer, he relished the idea of applying his technical prowess and that of his fellow teammates to retrieve the fabled ship and finally bring her home.

Stevens likened their mission to the ongoing effort by Lieutenant Reginald Barclay and the

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Pathfinder project to contact the U.S.S. Voyager, stranded in the Delta Quadrant with her crew valiantly trying to get home. While the stakes for this mission certainly werent on the same level, Fabian Stevens felt as strongly about this mission as Barclay had about bringing the Voyagers crew home safely.

As he made his way toward the science station, Duffy decided to put Stevenss question back on him.

Well, how do things look to you?

How technical do you want to get, Duff? Stevens grinned. He tapped several commands into his con-sole to bring up a graph with a series of fluctuating bars. Weve finished our modifications to the deflector dish, and with even a low-strength infusion from the beam, we should have a nice stable area of the Defiants hull to latch onto with the tractor beam.

Stevens tapped once more and the bar graph dissolved.

Curse me for being overconfident, Duff, but this ought to go pretty smoothly.

Duffy nodded to Stevens and smiled, shrouding his sincere hope for a trouble-free mission in a quip.

Smoothly? That would be a refreshing change. As he turned away from the science station, he became aware that he was the object of someones attention, and that someone wasnt happy.

Of course, Id have to consult a calendar to figure out the last time ol Core Breach was happy, Duffy joked to

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himself as he turned his attention to the da Vincis security chief, Domenica Corsi.

Concerns, Commander?

Corsi maintained her stiff stance near the security console, moving no muscle except those needed to deepen her frown. Duffy decided to meet her there rather than forcing her to call across the bridge; that would be the more captainly way to handle it. As he took one step toward her, however, Corsi made it clear she wasn't above raising her voice.

You seem pretty relaxed, Commander Duffy.

He hustled his step to meet Corsi, hoping his proximity might prompt her to tone down. I want everyone to relax, Corsi, including you. Okay, mostly just you. He decided to add a smile in order to ease the remarks effect.

Unfazed, she replied, Never mind that were in hostile space with a Tholian ship off our bow. You don't even have our shields up or our weapons charged.

That's at Carol's and Captain Gold's recommendations, he countered. We do that, and the Tholians will be sure to get curious. And just what would we say in response? That were nervous?

You know it's against regulations. As if sensing her own breach of protocol, Corsi lowered her voice.

I want people to be prepared on the bridge, not calm

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and folksy as you would have them.

Bristling at the implied criticism, Duffy snapped back, Tell you what, Commander—next time, you can sit in the big boys chair.

He caught himself, his ears ringing with reminders of Sonya's advice against getting baited by Corsi. On the surface, the crew almost universally saw the security chief as a hard-nosed stickler for protocol and procedure. But, as Sonya said, a person such as Corsi was never bad for a captain to have at his or her disposal.

Duffy knew that in a pinch, he could turn to Corsi for advice and that he could count on her to act quickly and correctly.

And one thing he did not want now was her noticing his unease with command.

Wait a minute, Duffy said and stalled. That was uncalled for. He tried another smile, holding his hands out in supplication. Listen, I'll toe the command line if you remind me of regulation breaches later, okay? Corsi nodded, seemingly placated for the moment, and Duffy again noted one of the reasons

that he would never pine away for the center seat.

Its not a starship that a captain has to manage so much, he reminded himself. Its her crew.

A hail from the Defiant pricked up Duffys ears. The voice was Sonyas and she was just whom he wanted to hear, if only as a mental pick-me-up.

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Defiant to da Vinci. Commander Duffy? Were ready on this end.

Duffy smiled. And ahead of the Tholians schedule by, oh, twelve minutes and change. They ought to appreciate your efforts, Commander.

He looked in the direction of Carol Abramowitz, who was seated at the communications console. As a cultural specialist, she was pretty used to the post although it wasnt her usual one. Duffy had seen her talk the crews way through plenty of encounters before; Carols background made her the perfect blending of a diplomat and a crewperson with Starfleet training at heart.

Carol, alert the Tholian commander that well be starting our operation momentarily, Duffy said, sti-pling a more natural urge to phrase things as requests rather than orders.

She nodded and tapped the console before her.

Commander Nostrene, this is the da Vinci. I know this is-

You are twelve minutes and eleven seconds prema-  
ture for your next scheduled communication, came a reply in a synthesized voice that Duffy recognized as the echoing timbre assigned by the computer to all Tholian communications. Hed had plenty of oppor-  
tunities to hear the native tongues of races across the Alpha Quadrant the guttural barking of Klingon, the almost lyrical qualities of Vulcan and Romulan, and

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the clicks and grunts peppering High Tellarite that almost always made him chuckle. But he had never heard the actual sounds of the Tholian language.

Sonya once likened it to the screech of a tritanium blade on glass.

Yes, Commander, but forgive our haste as we need to inform you that we are ready to begin the salvage operation, Abramowitz said in an even, almost apologetic tone. Our away team is prepared, and we know that time is of the essence for you and the Assembly.

Understood, replied the computer voice that

Duffy assumed was Nostrene. He figured the Tholian commander must have drawn this plum assignment from his higher-ups through to the bitter end, as Nostrenes name was attached to the Tholian reports passed through Starfleet Intelligence to the da Vinci. Nostrenes ship had been the first Tholian vessel on the scene of the rifts reopening and the Defiants reappearance. Just to remind you, Commander, Abramowitz said, we expect this to be a routine maneuver. We will project a pair of beams from the da Vinci. A narrow, bluish one will be our tractor beam and will come from the front of our ship. The wider, yellowish beam that will stabilize the molecular integrity of the trapped ship will come from our deflector dish. Neither beam will affect your ship. With any luck,

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well need just a few minutes to pull the Defiant free. Then well be on our way. Proceed, was all Nostrene said before cutting the channel. Duffy exchanged an amused look with the cultural liaison. Im really going to miss these stimulating conversations when this is all over. He was about to order Stevens to begin when his commbadge chirped, startling him from speaking. Gold to Duffy. I need to interrupt your operations a moment. Duffy felt his pulse quicken at the captains words. Had something gone wrong? Not according to readings on their end. He tipped his head toward the bridges ceiling, as if that might make him more audible to the crew on the old starship. What is it, Captain? Have Carol patch me through to the Tholian commander, said Gold. And feel free to listen in. You all may find this interesting. Duffy and Abramowitz met each others gaze as if on cue. He nodded once to her as she tapped commands on the console before her. Commander Nostrene, please prepare for communications from Captain Gold on board the Defiant. She paused for a moment until the Tholian commander signaled his readiness to proceed, then said, Captain Gold, go ahead.

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Commander Nostrene, Gold said, weve discovered something onboard the Defiant that I believe will make this operation one of historical significance for both our peoples. We are transmitting for your interpretation

our tricorder readings of a device we found stowed here. We'll be pleased to turn it over to you for return to the Assembly as a token of our appreciation for your help in retrieving this starship.

Duffy noted Abramowitz's quick tapping as she not only forwarded the tricorder data to the Tholians but recorded it in the da Vincis memory banks as well.

The speakers rang with the computerized timbre of Tholian voice. Received and acknowledged.

Abramowitz, focused on readings from her console, said, Captain, the transmissions been cut from their end.

Duffy smirked and spoke up himself. I'm sure there's a Tholian word for thank you somewhere in our linguistics records. In any event, Captain, we're definitely interested in seeing everything you've found over there.

Maybe not everything, Mr. Duffy. The sober tone of his captain's voice gave the engineer pause before the full realization of Gold's remark hit home. The Defiant was, after all, more than simply an unsolved mystery or engineering challenge. The ship was also a tomb, the final resting place of more than four hundred men and women who had given their lives in

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service to Starfleet. Above all else, Duffy reminded himself, that one fact could not be forgotten in their haste to accomplish the recovery mission.

Gold's voice interrupted his thoughts. Commander, if you're ready on your end, let's get this show on the road.

Duffy tried to exude some confidence, for Gold's benefit as well as his own. Once more unto the breach and all that, Captain. We'll have you out in no time.

Mazel tov, Mr. Duffy.

As the connection was severed, Duffy started toward Stevens's station, then paused. A quick check of the bridge showed that everyone was at their stations, ready to go. They all knew their jobs and had everything under control. With that taken care of, he realized it was time for him to step up and do the job Captain Gold had given him, and there was only one place where that could be accomplished.

Tightening his lips, he turned instead to the steps leading to the captain's chair. Without a hesitation or flourish, he settled into the center seat. He imagined the chair embracing him, the authority and responsibility it represented reaching out to envelop him and fuel him with the confidence he needed to see this



mission through.

Hey, this doesnt feel so bad.

Mr. Stevens, he said, not looking away from the  
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viewscreen, ready the navigational deflector.

As Stevens tapped at his console, Duffy spoke again.

Da Vinci to Defiant. Commander Gomez, alert the  
away team that were bringing you out. Prepare your  
thrusters, please.

Gomez was quick to reply. Ready on your mark,  
Commander.

Stevens signaled his readiness as well. Duffy paused  
a beat to center himself, then, Go with the deflector,  
Mr. Stevens.

Duffy watched the main viewer as a wide, sparkling  
beam burst from the bottom of the screen and shot  
arrow-straight to the Defiant. The gold hue of the  
beam mingled and swirled with the neon-blue glow of  
the trapped ships saucer section, stirring colors and  
flashing energy in ways that Duffy had never seen. In  
the center of the maelstrom grew a patch of dirty  
white. As he stared, the white took on definition as  
precisely spaced crosshatches of black appeared with-in.  
He watched the very hull of the Defiant integrate  
at the deflector beams touch.

Commander, Stevenss voice broke across the  
nearly soundless bridge, shes emerging from the rift  
and the hull is phasing as projected. We have enough  
room now to grab her.

Duffy spoke more loudly than even he expected.

Tractor beam at maximum, Fabian. Now!

He watched a thin blue beam etch a path across the  
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gold of the existing one. While they appeared inter-twined  
from the bridge, the tractor beam actually  
skated meters above the dish emission, narrowing its  
proximity to the integrity field as it approached the  
Defiant and struck the ship exactly where the white  
hull plates coalesced within the colorful swirl. The  
patterns worked to soothe Duffy a bit as he turned his  
attention to the pair of consoles before him.

Pull us back, Mr. Wong. One-quarter impulse.

Ensign Songmin Wong tapped Duffys orders into  
his helm console and Duffy felt the da Vinci lurch,  
rocking him forward in his seat. As he leaned back in  
the chair, Duffy saw the integrated area of the  
Defiants saucer growing at a much faster rate than  
before. The ship waxed into whiteness as if emerging  
from an eclipse.

Could it be this simple, even after all these years?

Duffy called out to the viewscreen, Sonya, how are you doing?

The speaker came to life with a laugh. Were fine, Kieran. Even with the heads-up, you guys still managed to knock Pattie off of her feet. You need thrusters?

Seems to be good on our end without them, Duffy said, nearly able to read the markings on the under-side of the Defiants saucer section, faded but still stark against the white of the hull. Weve almost got the pri-

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Wong interrupted. Commander, Im getting some resistance now. Its growing, almost as if somethings pulling harder the farther we get the Defiant out. Heres where the fun begins, Duffy cracked to him-self. Is this new?

Stevens answered first. Not new. The pull from inside the rift was slight from the very beginning and was almost undetectable. He checked more readings. Yeah, its growing exponentially, Duff. Well have to fight to get her free.

Kick it up to half-impulse, Mr. Wong, Duffy said, and intensify that deflector beam, Fabian. I dont want to rip a chunk out of the saucer just to win a tug-of-war.

Duffy didnt want to contemplate a stalemate just yet as he hoped the away team could help. Stand by on thrusters, Sonya. Seems as if well need all of the kick we can get.

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Tholians were not known as a race that wasted a lot of movement. Their unusual physiology, evolved over millennia spent on their home planet, did not lend itself to ease of mobility beyond the confines of that world. Conditions aboard ship favored their life support needs, of course, but generations spent exploring and colonizing other planets had long since conditioned Tholians to conserve their energy for only the most appropriate of occasions.

Nostrene, however, cared for none of that as he paced the length of his private quarters. He had decisions to make, and precious little time to make them.

His analysis of the data supplied by the Starfleet engineers regarding the device they had found in the

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abandoned ships cargo hold had led him to believe that the mechanism was of Tholian origin. However, he had not recognized it, and his surprise was compounded when a search of his ships computer yielded no useful information. That revelation had prompted him to transmit the data and his report to the High Magistrates personally.

Their response had been alarming.

'We are to destroy the derelict?' asked Taghrex, Nostrene's second in command. From where he stood near the computer station terminal set into one wall of the room, he studied the message Nostrene had just received from the High Magistrates on the home world. He made no effort to hide the astonishment in his voice.

'That is the command of the Magistrates,' Nostrene replied. 'As soon as we are able to achieve a weapons lock, we are to either capture or destroy it as circumstances permit. Either of these options will obviously require us to destroy the recovery vessel as well.'

'We risk retaliatory action from the Federation,' Taghrex said. 'Is that truly a wise course?'

Nostrene did not reply immediately, instead taking an additional moment to study his subordinate. Like Nostrene, his body was of a similar reddish hue as befitting someone of noble upbringing. Taghrex had served with distinction under him for many cycles, more than the Tholian commander could easily

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remember. He would make a fine leader one day, of that Nostrene was sure, once he learned to curb his rash impulses to openly question the wisdom or dictates of those superior to him.

Taghrex was correct about one thing, Nostrene decided. Their next action could well anger the Federation, perhaps endangering the fragile peace that had been established between the two governments.

As if sensing that he may have overstepped his bounds, Taghrex said, 'If the Magistrates are willing to risk such a response, then the situation we face now must be dire indeed.'

Much better, Nostrene mused. There was potential in the young officer yet. 'You are correct,' he said. 'It seems that the Starfleet engineers have stumbled across something that should not exist, at least not any longer.'

Part of a prototype defensive system, the land-based web generator had been designed to capture the inhabitants of a planetary installation without harm to them or the structures they occupied. At least, that

was what the Assembly's official position had been. Once seized, prisoners from captured areas could then be easily transported to facilities properly designed to detain them while Tholian forces moved in to occupy the newly acquired territory. However, the system had only been employed once outside of

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strictly controlled testing environments, and the results had been catastrophic. The official conclusion from the investigation following the incident was that the systems designers had not adequately foreseen the radical physiological differences encountered in the wide variety of life forms in this region of the galaxy. Having read the report that the Magistrates had sent along with their message, Nostrene considered the findings to be ludicrous. How could scientists of such caliber create a revolutionary nonlethal weapon, designed for use against all manner of species, and not take into account the biological varieties inherent in such an attempt? It was incomprehensible to him, though it was an opinion he doubted he would ever share with anyone else.

In this particular case, the radical physiological differences encountered had been Klingon, and not even a military target, but instead a civilian agricultural colony. The Empire had been furious to learn of the settlement's destruction, swearing vengeance on those who had been slaughtered. The true nature of what had happened had never been discovered by anyone, and the Magistrates had kept it that way all this time.

Only now, the secret is threatening to be revealed because of the Starfleet engineers, Taghrex concluded, absorbing what his commander had told him with

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degrees of awe and uncertainty. Nostrene nodded. During their investigation, the surveyors of the colony discovered that one of the generation systems emitter arrays was missing. We now know that the Federation ship currently trapped in the rift took it. Reports did place the vessel in that part of space. They must have come across the colony, investigated it, and found the destruction wrought by the web generator.

And since Federation scientists like to study everything in painstaking detail, Taghrex said, they took the emitter array with them, having no real idea as to what it was they carried.

And they remain ignorant, it seems, Nostrene replied, knowing that it had fallen to him to take maximum advantage of that ignorance in order to protect the Assembly's interests.

He knew that the political ramifications of the next few moments went far beyond the simple angering of the Klingons. While the Empire might very well respond with hostility to the news, the Assembly could ill afford to alienate the Federation at this time. Diplomatic relations had reached a critical juncture, and the Magistrates feared that negative repercussions from any revelations made here today could put the Federation into a difficult position. They could well be forced to choose between their alliance with the Klingons and the progress they had made with the

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Tholians. It was not difficult to believe that any decision would not be in the Assembly's favor.

Avoiding such a predicament seemed the only logical choice to make, the Magistrates believed. They considered the destruction of one or even two Starfleet vessels a small price to pay, and had issued the order to Nostrene.

But being a seasoned commander, Nostrene would not act rashly. In order to succeed, his plan of attack would have to be bold and focused, with the first priority being the destruction of the derelict ship and the emitter array. That way, even if he failed to defeat the recovery vessel, the damning evidence harbored by the trapped ship would no longer be an issue.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the intraship communications system.

Commander, the sensor officer called out from the command deck. The Federation ship has increased power to their tractor beam. They seem to be experiencing difficulty pulling the other vessel free.

So the operation is turning out to be more difficult than anticipated, Nostrene thought. Perhaps the Starfleet engineers would fail in their attempt to retrieve their trophy. If that were to be the case, he would not be surprised. Nostrene had always considered it the height of arrogant presumption for anyone to think that mechanical devices created by fallible

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beings could have any real influence on natural phenomena such as the interdimensional anomaly holding the forsaken starship.

Of course, he fully expected arrogant presumption

to win out today, and for that he knew he must be pre-pared. Moments later, he and Taghrex walked onto the command deck. His eyes scanned the main display screen and saw that the Starfleet recovery vessels tractor and deflector beams were still active and con-centrated on the center of the rift.

What is the status of the trapped ship? he asked the sensor officer.

It is difficult to be certain, the subordinate replied. The rift is still blocking our scans. But the ship is approaching the threshold of the opening, and the Starfleet engineers tell us that there will be a moment of molecular disruption as it moves through that barrier. Once that process has begun, our sensor readings should improve.

How much time would he have before he was forced to act? He could not risk attempting to arm weapons until he was certain a lock could be obtained on the trapped ship, otherwise he risked alerting the recovery vessels crew. Likewise, he could not even order the ships defensive screens activated, as that would also make their Starfleet counterparts suspi-cious.

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Commander, the sensor officer called out again, scans of the Defiant are improving. She has engaged low power thrusters. They have managed to restore limited power to the vessel and it appears they are try-ing to assist the rescue operation. The subordinate spent several moments studying the sensor informa-tion before issuing his next report. The forward edge of the vessels primary hull has begun to emerge from the rift, Commander.

Nostrene did not have to look to know that Taghrex was staring at him, waiting for his instructions.

Though he may have voiced concerns over the Magistrates directives earlier, the Tholian com-mander knew that his second in command would carry out his orders without question when the time came to act.

That time, Nostrene admitted, had come.

\* \* \*

Gomez took one final look at the status readings displayed on the bridges engineering console moni-tors before nodding in satisfaction. The power gener-ators they had brought with them were working per-fectly, and thruster power was available. It wasnt much, but with the da Vinci already applying the full force of its workhorse engines and tractor beam, it should be enough.

Id find a seat, everyone, she said as she stepped

down into the command well and made her way to

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the helm console. This could get bumpy.

Gold heeded her advice and lowered himself into the captains chair. It wasnt as comfortable as his chair on the da Vinci, a fact compounded by the bulky environmental suit he still wore. Looking to his right, he saw that Soloman remained seated at the science officers console, his wide eyes watching the main viewer.

And for good reason, too. The sight on the screen was a kaleidoscopic furor of energy as the Defiant struggled against the interdimensional forces holding it inside the rift. Gold thought he could faintly see stars beyond the multihued chaos dominating the screen, though. He told himself that it wasnt his eyes playing tricks on him. They were making progress. He continued to tell himself that even as the deck beneath his feet, already vibrating noticeably since the da Vinci had locked on with her tractor beam, began to tremble with increasing fervor.

You werent kidding, Gold said to Gomez as his hands instinctively grabbed onto the arms of the cap-tains chair.

Gomez replied without turning her attention from her console. It will probably get worse as we start to cross the threshold. Thats when the molecular shift will occur as we move out of the rift and back into normal space. Besides, I couldnt spare the power to the inertial dampening field. Well feel pretty much

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every bump in the road from here on out.

We are approaching the barrier, Commander, Soloman reported, his face bathed in blue as he peered into the science stations viewfinder, which fil-tered and displayed all relevant sensor data at the command of the person operating it. Transition should occur in five seconds.

Gold found himself counting to himself as the inter-val passed, the bucking of the ship continuing to increase with each passing second. On the screen, the stars he thought he had seen earlier were now quite distinct. Another few moments and they would be free of the rift.

Its going to work.

The thought came, of course, just before everything went to hell.

Gold felt his stomach lurch and his teeth rattle as something seemed to reach out and smack the entire

ship, hull plates and bulkheads rattling and shaking as the Defiant twisted first one way and then another. The sounds of protesting metal were nearly deafening in the small confines of the bridge.

What the hell was that? Gold yelled above the din.

Knuckles white as she held onto the helm, Gomez shook her head. I dont know. It felt like-

We are under attack, Soloman interrupted, fight-ing to read the sensor telemetry even as he too gripped onto his console for support. The Tholians

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are firing on us!

What? Gold replied, scarcely believing his ears even as his mouth formed around the words to order evasive action, experience and instinct beginning to take over. His brain took an additional instant to catch up and remind him that the Defiant, even if not in the grip of the da Vincis tractor beam, currently had all the maneuverability of an elephant in a closet. Gold to da Vinci, he called into his communicator, his thoughts quickly turning to his ship and the vul-nerable position they were in so long as they main-tained their hold on the Defiant. Duffy would have to disengage if he were to have any chance of protecting the da Vinci should the Tholians attack her.

There was no response to his call.

Repeating the attempt achieved the same results , and Gold turned to Gomez. I cant raise the ship.

It was Soloman who replied, still continuing to study the sensor displays. The Tholians weapons fire has caused a . . . disruption in the rift, Captain.

Communications have been . . . disabled.

Damn. Gold wondered about Duffy and the pres-sure he must be feeling right now. It was one thing to learn the rigors of command from classroom study and even from time spent aboard ships in space. It was quite another thing to be tried by fire under com-bat conditions. Many hopeful commanders had failed this particular type of test. How would Duffy respond

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to the challenge dropped so unceremoniously into his lap?

Before he could consider that answer, the ship shuddered again as the Defiants unshielded hull absorbed the brunt of another attack. The shock tore Gold from the chair and tossed him forward without warning. He threw his arms out in a desperate effort to protect himself from the impact of being thrown into the unmanned navigation console.



It never came.

Air was forced from Gold's lungs as he crashed into the deck, coming to rest at the foot of the stairs leading to the bridge's upper deck.

Captain! Gomez cried as she bolted from her seat, moving around the helm console to kneel next to Gold.

Rolling onto his side, the captain realized with astonishment that he was lying in front of the navigator's station. He looked at the console that he was sure he should have fallen into and was stunned at the sight before him.

Sonya, he said, his voice a horrified whisper, look.

Before them, the captain's chair was clearly visible through the surface of the helm console, itself looking like a hazy, semitransparent film draped across the command well.

Molecular shift, Soloman called out from the sci-87 INTERPHASE BOOK ONE

ence station. They're occurring . . . all across the ship. I suspect it is a reaction to . . . the weapons fire inside the rift.

The ship rocked again under yet another assault and Gomez was knocked from her kneeling position to the deck. Everyone reached for handholds as the Defiant endured the latest round of punishment, shaking violently once again.

We can't take much more of this, Gomez said.

Without shields, they'll cut us to pieces.

Gold pulled himself to a sitting position. Any chance you can divert power?

The shield generators are completely inert and I'd have to go to engineering to get them back online. We don't have that kind of time.

Captain, Soloman said. The da Vinci has severed her tractor beam. The Bynar turned from the console, his expression one of deep concern. We are being pulled back into the rift.

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They're firing! The Tholians are firing on the Defiant!

A backhand from an enraged Brikar could not have spun Duffy around in the da Vinci's captain's chair with more force than did the voice of Ensign Wong. He had turned away from the viewscreen for only a moment to better focus on data coming from Fabian Stevens at the science station. But in that moment, his worst-case scenario, the one he had tucked even deeper in his mind than thoughts of phaser-cutting

the Defiants primary hull free from the ship should the rift pull too tightly on its warp nacelles, leapt fully formed from his imagination to the main viewer.

Duffy felt time slow as he stared at the screen,

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watching the inevitable. A reddish blob of energy, writhing and expanding, closed on the Defiants saucer section and spread across it. The crippled star-ship rocked a bit in response, jostling hardly at all in the perspective provided by the viewer.

But with no shields? That had to hurt.

Theyve gone space crazy! Wong shouted. Duffy wasnt so sure about that, but he was willing to let the whole bridge crew assume that the Tholians had fallen prey to the effects of the interspatial rift. He saw no immediate need to speculate on the true motivations of the inscrutable race of crystalline beings.

What the hell is going on? What did we do wrong? As the Defiant reeled from her blow, the Tholians struck again, this time with a disruptor burst that appeared even more intensely red than the first. Words stuck in his throat as Duffy saw the old ship rock even more violently than it had from the first attack.

Duff, Im having trouble holding the tractor beam on her, called Stevens from the science station.

Then dont hold it.

The words were Corsis, startling Duffy nearly as much as had the Tholians attack. His head snapped around and he stared at the security chief, his mouth already open to ask her if she was out of her mind.

But he reined in his words before they could be uttered. He just as quickly dismissed his first instinct that Corsi was challenging his authority and instead

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remembered Sonyas advice to hear Corsi out, especially in a fight. Duffy had always thought she meant the next time they laid over at a club on Argelius II.

He scolded himself. Dont joke; listen to her. She doesnt think youre weak, shes just trying to help.

What do you mean? he asked Corsi.

The Defiant has no shields. Theyll be ripped apart out here, but maybe theyll be safer in the rift. She kept her tone civil, Duffy hoped out of respect for his command. And besides, we wont be able to maneuver as long as were locked on with our tractor beam.

Duffy knew where she was going, and cursed himself for not reacting sooner. The rescue operation was transforming rapidly into a tactical situation. The fate

of the Defiant as well as the da Vinci could well rest on the decisions he made in the next moments.

Shields up! he yelled before attempting to temper his voice with the same confidence he heard in Captain Gold's orders under fire. Fabian, disengage the beams. Mr. McAllan, lock weapons on the Tholian ship, but hold your fire.

Without missing a beat, the da Vinci's tactical officer tapped the commands into his console. Aye, sir.

As he directed a final glance at Corsi, Duffy hoped his next words were tinged with enough appreciation for her to pick up.

Recommendation noted, Commander.

Corsi did not give him the smug look he half expected

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from her, but instead offered a nod and a grim, tight-lipped smile. Let's just hope it works.

\* \* \*

In the cargo hold on deck 20, the attack on the Defiant was felt with an even greater intensity than on the bridge.

P8 Blue and Lense found themselves in a hellstorm as cargo containers and equipment across the bay began to shift and tumble in response to the second assault on the ship. The lack of gravity, protective forcefields, and inertial dampening systems only exacerbated the situation as boxes sailed around the room, bouncing off the deck, bulkheads, the ceiling, and each other.

Look out! Lense cried, pulling the Nasat out of the path of a cargo crate as it rushed past where she had been standing the instant before.

What is going on? Pattie asked as the pair rested against the bulkhead, catching their breath while trying to keep an eye on the legion of errant debris pervading the chamber.

Somebody's shooting at us, Lense said. Probably the Tholians.

Pattie looked at the doctor askance. Why? How can you be sure?

Cursing for what seemed like the hundredth time at her helmet interfering with her ability to wipe the perspiration from her face, Lense replied, I don't

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know why they'd want to attack us, but I've been on ships that were shot at enough to know what it feels like.

And she'd certainly had her fill of that during the Dominion War, a course of events she had not counted on after graduating first in her Starfleet medical

class. Such an accomplishment normally allowed the honored individual to choose their first duty assignment, and Lense had opted for Starfleet Medical Headquarters on Earth. She enjoyed that posting for a few years as she concentrated on research before deciding on a change of pace and requesting assignment to the U.S.S. Lexington. But then valedictorian status and personal preference gave way to the needs of the service as war erupted between the Federation and the Dominion. She always felt more than capable of handling any situation that life might confront her with, but that resolve had been sorely tested as she faced enough death and desecration against living tissue to last her several lifetimes.

You signed on with the da Vinci to get away from war and the horrors it inflicts on the body, Lense reminded herself. So how did you end up here?

Unless Gomez can figure out a way to get enough power for the shields, Lense said, were a sitting duck out here.

Any reply Pattie might have had was stifled as the Defiant shuddered against a third vicious impact to its

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hull. The shock from the attack sent the pair stumbling again for something to hold on to.

Pattie! Lense yelled out. The Nasat turned in her direction too late to avoid the cargo container careening off the deck and heading directly for her. She was directly in its path, trapped between it and the bulk-head.

The tumbling box was moving fast enough and was of sufficient size that Lense feared Pattie would be severely injured if not crushed by its impact.

The Nasat's eight limbs went out in a futile attempt to stop the wayward container, but could offer no resistance as it struck her full on. Lense saw Pattie's head snap back, the box having struck her in the helmet and upper body and driving her toward the bulk-head behind her with the container in fervent pursuit.

Lense lunged forward to help, reacting instinctively rather than with any real course of action in mind. As she moved, she looked to the bulkhead that Pattie was about to smash into.

She saw stars.

No! was all Lense could shout before Pattie and the cargo container made contact with the bulkhead.

And passed through it as if it wasn't even there.

For a split second, Lense's mind refused to accept what she had just seen. The Defiant's hull had begun to destabilize around them, and Pattie had fallen outside of the ship itself!

Pattie? Do you read me? she called into her com-94

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municator, but received no response. Was the Nasat injured, or worse? Had her suit sustained damage in the collision with the cargo container? Was she losing oxygen?

Dont just stand there, her mind screamed at her.

Move!

And before she realized what she was doing,

Elizabeth Lense leapt straight from the figurative fry-ing pan into the proverbial fire.

Though the bulkheads surface had turned trans-parent with the consistency of a membrane or thin gauze, she noted no strange sensation of passing through any such barrier as she leapt through the destabilized hull section and into open space. The first thing she saw as she emerged from the ship was Pattie, her body limp as she drifted slowly away from the Defiant.

Pattie, can you hear me? she called out even as she activated her suits maneuvering thrusters, puls-ing the small jets of compressed gas. It took a moment to orient her body so that she was moving in the correct direction as she called on skills that she hadnt given a second thought to since her days at the Academy.

The Nasat did not respond to her latest call, and Lense concluded that she must have been knocked unconscious. How serious was the injury? Did she have a concussion? Could she be treated here, or

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would she require transport back to the da Vinci?

All of these questions and many others flooded Lenses mind as she closed the gap. After another moment, she was able to reach out and grab an errant leg, her gloved hand closing around the fabric of Patties environment suit.

Gotcha, she whispered, sure that Pattie was unconscious when the Nasat did not react to having her leg grabbed. Dont worry, well get back to the ship and . . . The sentence faded away incomplete as she reoriented her body to face the Defiant.

Elizabeth Lense had never been outside a starship before. The closest she had come was an observation port at SpaceDock orbiting Earth, looking through plexisteel windows at vessels berthed in various park-ing slips. While those ships looked big from that per-spective, the derelict before her now was positively huge.

What the hell am I doing out here? she asked

aloud as she pulsed her thrusters again, pushing her and Pattie closer to the ship. Lense stretched a hand out as several more seconds of maneuvering brought the vessels hull within reach.

Then it and the rest of her body made contact with the tritanium surface, discovering that the hull was as solid as a starships skin was supposed to be.

Of course, her mind taunted, reminding her that even in the 24 th Century, Murphys Law still applied  
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Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong.

They should make that the S.C.E. motto, Lense decided as she set her feet and activated the magnet-ic seals on her boots. Once secured to the hull, she surveyed the area of the ship in her range of vision.

She had returned to the Defiant near the midpoint of the secondary hull, yet there were no signs of airlocks or other entries into the ship that she could see.

Where were they located? Other than the shuttlebay doors at the rear of the ship, she had no idea. She hadnt consulted the Defiants technical schematics prior to beaming over.

Adjusting her hold on Pattie, she turned the Nasat in order to look into her helmet and saw that she was still unconscious. An area the size of a fist appeared to be swelling over her left eye, and Lense saw that the bruise was already beginning to turn a dark blue. Pattie, can you hear me? I need you to wake up. A moments scan with her tricorder confirmed her sus-picion Pattie did indeed have a concussion. She would need medical treatment, and soon, something Lense would not be able to provide so long as they were stuck outside the ship.

Damn it, she whispered, turning her head to face the front of the ship when her attention was caught by something else. It was the rift, the barrier marking the entrance to interspace. Unlike the black void sur-rounding the Defiant, the rift itself was a spectacular

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clashing of colors, colliding and mixing to form a frenzied chaos.

And it was shrinking. The rift was closing back up! While Lense stood by, a powerless spectator, the tear that had brought together two spatial planes was slowly healing itself. They and the Defiant would be cut off from their companions and in fact from their entire universe.

Well, this was certainly a bright idea.

\* \* \*

The rift is sucking them back inside? Duffy spoke to no one in particular. The question was unnecessary, though, as everyone on the da Vincis bridge could easily see the Defiants regression into interphase. The numbing sight almost made Duffy not notice that there was still a Tholian ship nearby, and that it was at this very moment turning itself toward the da Vinci. As Corsi had predicted, things were about to go completely to hell.

Were not shooting first, he said, willing to tele-graph his strategies to the bridge crew in the hope that they might better understand his command decisions. Turning his attention to Abramowitz at the communications station, he said, Carol, open a channel and find-  
Incoming fire!

Wongs warning drowned out the rest of Duffys order as the ensign frantically punched commands  
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into his console in an attempt to move the ship out of the line of fire. On the screen, the hellish red burst of energy grew until it washed over the entire image.

The next instant the da Vinci pitched upward, throwing Duffy nearly out of his command chair and catching Wong completely off his guard. The ensigns head slammed into his console with a sickening sound that Duffy heard even over the klaxons and warning signals erupting across the bridge. He rushed forward, catching Wongs slumping body before it dropped to the deck.

Even as he eased the ensign to the floor, though, it struck Duffy that no orders were being given to respond to the attack.

Thats because youre not giving them. The realization jerked him back to his first priority.

Corsi, take the helm. McAllan, fire phasers. And a torpedo. He paused. Hell, two torpedoes.

Frustration and confusion enveloped every word that left Duffys mouth. And turn off those damned alarms!

As McAllan tapped out the necessary commands, Duffy continued tending to Wong. He tapped his commbadge. Bridge to sickbay. Copper? Wetzel? One of you, up here now!

From the tactical station, McAllan called out, Looks like we got them, Commander.

Duffy turned to the viewer in time to see the  
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Tholian ship listing to its portside, shunted from the

offensive position it had held only seconds before. He could see an ugly black puncture wound on the side of the vessels hull, evidence of the damage the da Vincis barrage had caused.

Nice shooting, Mr. McAllan, he said. Carol, open a channel. I want to know what . . .

The words died in his throat as, on the viewscreen, energy glowed from the stern of the Tholian ship. Reorienting itself in a sluggish maneuver, the vessel pivoted on its axis and pulled away from the da Vinci, moving quickly out of the viewscreens coverage.

Theyre moving off, Corsi said from the helm. She turned to look at Duffy, her eyes asking the obvious. Were not chasing them, he said simply.

Though he noticed the mild slump in her shoulders, Corsis tone was all business. Theyll be back, you know, and theyll bring reinforcements. Tholians dont like getting their butts kicked.

Its worse than that, Abramowitz added as she stepped down to assist Duffy with Wong. Theyll view the attack on them as an act of aggression. We may have just caused an interstellar incident.

Well, thatll certainly make Captain Golds day, Duffy said as he rose to his feet. The attempt at humor fell flat, he knew, almost flinching at how weak the words sounded even as they left his mouth. Getting into a political hotbed with the Tholians was

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no laughing matter, and he imagined how the Federation Diplomatic Corps would blow its collec-tive stack once word of the altercation got back to them.

No time for that now. Get it together, Duff.

Our first priority is to get the Defiant out, he said.

Fabian, reestablish the tractor be-

His voice fell off as he focused on the main viewer.

The Defiant, and the rift, were gone.

To be continued in

Interphase Book Two!

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