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On more than one occasion, mostly during the early years of her career, Commander Sonya Gomez had experienced feelings of helplessness in the midst of a crisis. As she stood on the bridge of the U.S.S. Defiant and studied the surreal image displayed on its main viewer, such feelings once again taunted her and dared her to submit to their stifling embrace.

Along with Captain David Gold and Soloman, she watched as the interdimensional rift continued to mend itself, sealing the Defiant inside this pocket of chaos ambiguously known as interphase and separating them from the U.S.S. da Vinci and their entire universe. At the moment, helplessness seemed almost appropriate.

## CHAPTER

### 1

The mission, like so many others Gomez had undertaken since joining the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, had started out easily enough. Daunting and compelling from both technical and historical perspectives, the task of retrieving the Defiant had

energized the entire da Vinci crew, from Captain Gold on down. The recovery of the fabled ship, lost for more than a century after becoming trapped in an interspatial pocket connecting this universe with another, presented a unique engineering challenge. When the ship disappeared in , most scientific minds throughout the Federation believed that it had been lost in the other universe with no hope of being recovered.

That belief had held true until two weeks ago, when a Tholian vessel had discovered the Defiant, still trapped in the interdimensional rift but now visible again for the first time in more than a century. The circumstances leading to the ships reappearance after so long remained a mystery and the Tholians, in their typical fashion, had not been forthcoming with any potentially helpful information.

And we could sure use that info now, Gomez mused. She had led an away team to the Defiant with the task of restoring minimal power to the derelict vessel. Working with Kieran Duffy, the da Vincis propulsion specialist, she had decided that the Defiants maneuvering thrusters could be used to help extract the ship from the rift, with the help of the da Vincis tractor beam. Duffy and his team had also modified the ships navigational deflector to stabilize the Defiants hull and make it easier for the tractor beam to lock onto the trapped ship.

Of course, it wouldnt have been an S.C.E. mission if the Defiant hadnt yielded a few surprises of its own. First had been the condition of the ship itself.

Drained of power, the Defiant was a lifeless hulk, dark and foreboding as the away team materialized in the depths of its engineering section. Then there were the remains of the ships crew, drifting free throughout the vessels interior in the absence of gravity. The nightmarish scene had caught Gomez off guard and caused her no small amount of anxiety. Her reaction to the situation troubled her, but she had managed to keep her unease at bay to this point by concentrating on the tasks at hand.

But then the Tholians had inexplicably fired on the Defiant, disrupting the da Vincis attempt to pull the century-old ship from the interspatial void and instead throwing the Defiant back into the rift. The action had the further effect of collapsing the pocket around the ship, trapping it and the da Vinci away team within the confines of interspace.

The weapons fire could have disturbed the fabric of space near the rift, Gomez said as she studied the century-old viewscreen. The area is already so unstable,

any kind of disruption would probably be enough to affect it.

Turning away from the viewscreen, Gold said, Something similar was reported in the old Enterprise logs when they discovered the Defiant. It had the effect of throwing off the interphase timetable. The Defiant still continued to appear and reappear, but they had to recalculate the intervals.

That means the da Vinci can probably still get us out, Gomez said.

Maybe, Gold replied as he stepped toward the starboard side of the command well. But first we need to make sure the ship wont fall apart around us. He turned his attention to the science station. Soloman, do we have internal sensors? Can you give us a damage report?

The Bynar keyed commands to the science console as his face was bathed in the soft blue light of the stations viewfinder. Several moments passed as he reviewed the information supplied by the Defiants limited sensors.

There are . . . hull breaches on decks eight, thirteen and . . . fifteen, he reported. There is also some buckling . . . in the port warp nacelle. As he turned away from the viewfinder, the Bynar added, The damage is minor, given the . . . intensity of the attack, Captain. We were . . . most fortunate.

Gomez sighed in relief. Ill say. If thats the extent of the damage, then we should be okay even under the pull of the da Vincis tractor beam.

If shes still there, Gold said, drawing shocked expressions from Gomez and Soloman. The da Vincis commanding officer didnt acknowledge the looks, however, instead adding, She may have been disabled or destroyed by the Tholians, or Mr. Duffy has obeyed my orders and taken her out of the area.

Either way, we may not be able to rely on the da Vinci to get us out of here.

Even if the rift was open, Gomez said, the Defiants maneuvering thrusters arent enough to push us out on their own. The generators they had brought with them from the da Vinci would never be enough to power the ships massive impulse engines, to say nothing about the warp drive.

Gold shrugged. Then well just have to find another way, wont we?

Captain, Gomez said, what if we do get out? The Tholians could be waiting on the other side of the rift for us. Wed be sitting ducks.

Given a choice between waiting here for who knows what to happen or taking our chances in normal

space, Gold replied, I choose the latter option.

The chirp of his suit communicator interrupted their conversation; it was followed by the voice of Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the da Vincis chief medical officer. Lense to Captain Gold. I have an emergency situation and require assistance.

Doctor? Gold called out, his voice rising a notch.

Are you all right? What about Pattie?

Shortly after beaming to the Defiant, P Blue, the S.C.E. teams resident Nasat engineer, had detected an odd power source emanating from deep within the ship. Gold had sent her and Dr. Lense to investigate, and they had found a strange device of Tholian design stored in one of the ships cargo holds. To the best of Golds knowledge, Pattie and Lense had remained down there during the Tholian attack. He had sudden visions of the pair caught in a maelstrom of cargo containers and equipment tumbling about the cargo hold free from the restraints of gravity, and Pattie and Lense frantically seeking cover from the potentially lethal assault.

I am uninjured, Lense replied to the captain, miraculously maintaining her composed tone of voice, but we are not in the cargo bay. During the attack, a section of the hull destabilized and Pattie fell out into space. As she was already unconscious, I had no choice but to follow.

What? Gold said. You mean youre drifting in space outside the ship?

No, sir. I managed to get us back, but by then the hull had solidified again. I am standing on the exterior of the ship, and I can find no sign of an airlock or other entry point. Pattie has sustained a concussion. She needs medical treatment, and I have to get her helmet off.

Gold looked to Gomez. Transporters? Can we beam her directly to the bridge?

The engineer shook her head. Theres no power to the transporters, sir, and no way to remote control them from up here. Someone would have to be in the transporter room on deck seven.

Gold turned to the science station to find Soloman already working at the sensor controls. He didnt have to wait long before the Bynar looked up.

I have located them, Captain. The closest entrance to . . . the ship is a maintenance airlock on the . . . starboard side of deck fourteen. I can direct her to that location . . . from here, but the hatch will have to be opened manually.

Lenses voice carried a note of concern. Im not

sure if I can do that by myself and take care of Pattie at the same time.

I can meet her there, Captain, Gomez said.

Soloman can give me directions to the hatch, and Ill get there through the Jefferies tubes. She knew that navigating the crawlspaces and maintenance thoroughways connecting nearly every point on the starship would be difficult while wearing her environment suit, but that would be offset somewhat by the absence of the ships artificial gravity field.

Sounds like a plan , Gold said, nodding his approval. In the meantime, Soloman and I are going to do some more detective work. Its pretty obvious that whatever set the Tholians off has something to do with that little tchotchke that Pattie and the doctor found in the cargo bay.

Today was the last day Kieran Duffy wanted an excuse to lie down on the job.

Yet mere minutes after his first space battle as the commanding officer of a Starfleet vessel, he was sprawled across the deck plates in the main engineering room of the U.S.S. da Vinci. Scattered to his side were a number of isolinear chips, once translucent and operational but now charred black and useless. He fumbled a few more of the chips in one hand, eyeing them for telltale signs of burnout, then double-checking his visual survey with the diagnostic reader he grasped in his other hand. Next to his head was an open panel, glowing from within and sporting about a dozen empty sockets waiting for working chips to be inserted.

## CHAPTER

### 2

Duffy let all but a pair of the chips slip from his grasp before craning his head to peer inside the con-sole.

The bright control panels with glowing chips appeared clean and new, belying the fact that they, key components in the starships warp-drive system, were about as functional as a wet match.

One hit.

Thats all it had taken from the Tholian ship to disable the da Vincis warp drive. It had been bad enough only a few hours before, when Captain Gold had tasked him with keeping the warp cores intermix ratios in balance as the starship set about her mission of extracting the U.S.S. Defiant from the interspatial rift. The unusual, tenuous connection that the rift had created between the two universes had been known to wreak havoc on the warp engines of ships venturing close to it, and Captain Gold wanted no such surprises during their recovery

operation.

Thanks to the Tholians, though, all of Duffy's calculating of formulas and finessing of the magnetic fields that prevented matter from blending too freely with antimatter was wasted.

How does that wisecrack go? The fight was two hits long. The Klingon hit the Cardassian and the Cardassian hit the floor. Whose the one on the floor now?

Duffy shoved his hand into the depths of the console to seat the pair of replacement chips. Straining, he slipped one chip into place, then maneuvered himself to another open slot, gripping the very edge of the remaining chip with the tips of two fingers.

But just as the chip found a purchase on the rim of the slot, a sharp blow to the bottom of his right foot rocked his entire body.

Yaa! he shouted, dropping the chip and smacking his head against the edge of the console's cavity.

Worming his way out of the opening, he looked up to see Domenica Corsi towering over him, her jaw clenched and the toe of her boot next to where she had just kicked him.

Just perfect, Corsi said. Ostriches stick their heads in the sand. You stick yours into a bulkhead.

Oh, excuse me, he fired back as he felt himself starting to heat up. I had the foolish idea that warp drive might be a nice thing to have before the Tholians get back. That is, unless you'd like to get out and push.

Corsi's scowl darkened. A ship full of engineers, and you're the only one who can fix it?

The question made Duffy pause, giving him a moment to catch his tongue rather than launch another barb. Yes, he was the da Vinci's top mind on matters of propulsion, and he acted as the ship's warp-core watchdog above and beyond even the chief engineer.

But now he was in command of the da Vinci. This was not the time for him to nursemaid a warp-drive problem, and it had taken Corsi to remind him of it. Again.

As if to emphasize the point, she said, You need to be on the bridge, Commander. Order someone else to repair the warp drive.

Duffy nodded. You're right. With a mischievous smile he added, You're getting to like keeping me in check, aren't you? He was satisfied to see the security chief's expression soften a little as her jaw muscles loosened.

Not much, but it's a start.

After detailing the top-priority repair assignment to the small army of engineers tending to various tasks here within the heart of the ship, Duffy smiled at Corsi again and headed for the door. She followed him, and the pair made their way quickly down the corridor.

As they walked, Duffy said, I need to know exactly where we are on repairs before Captain Scott tells us Starfleets official response to our situation. Id like some ideas on reopening the rift, too.

He tried not to dwell on his last conversation with the seasoned engineer who served as the figurehead for the Starfleet Corps of Engineers. It was Captain Montgomery Scott who had dispatched the da Vinci and her crew to Tholian space in the first place,

charging them with the challenge of retrieving the Defiant from the rift, while at the same time entrusting them with the delicate task of working with the temperamental Tholians. It was he whose face had fallen as Duffy relayed the events that had erupted just when the mission seemed to be going so well, and it was he who was likely getting his aft shields chewed right now by Starfleet brass as a result.

Corsis voice brought Duffy to attention. I assumed as much, Commander. The team is already waiting for us in the briefing room.

Duffy couldnt help the small laugh that escaped his lips, feeling more at ease with the idea that Core Breach Corsi was acting as a safety net for his first tightrope walk of a command. With her at his side, he might just survive this mission yet.

They entered the briefing room and Duffy took note of who was at the table, while at the same time trying not to think about who was noticeably absent.

Scattered about in their usual seats were other members of the team Carol Abramowitz, their chief liaison with the Tholian Assembly; Fabian Stevens, the ships expert on tactical systems; and Bartholomew Faulwell, the teams cryptography and language specialist, who had stepped in to help brainstorm options for salvaging their mission, given the current void of command officers. Duffy mulled taking the head seat at the table, the one typically occupied by Captain

Gold, but settled instead for the comfort of his usual chair next to Abramowitz.

Okay, Duffy began, placing his elbows on the table before him and lacing his fingers. Warp drive is almost operational again. Everything else is good to

go, right?

Stevens was quick to answer. We didnt take it on the chin too hard, Duff. Weapons are fine.

Communications, shields, the deflector array, life support, everything checks right on down the line. Id bet the warp drive would have been fine, too, if it wasnt for this space were in.

Duffy wondered whether that was the rule and not the exception here. Tholian ships disruptors could wreak havoc on unshielded vessels, he was certain, but it seemed that Federation starships with fully charged deflector shields usually could shrug off the initial volleys of such an attack.

Maybe so, Fabian, Duffy replied, but here, all bets are off. Right now I want to dig into the deflector modifications and see whether we can open the rift again without waiting for it. He knew that time was a precious commodity right now. The Tholians had to know how much damage they had inflicted on the da Vinci, and they most likely also knew that the starship wouldnt leave the area unless forced to, so long as there was a chance to recover the Defiant and the away team. The chronometer was ticking for those

aboard both ships, however, so he wasnt willing to be patient.

Corsi leaned forward in her seat. Shield harmonics need to be monitored closely as well, Mr. Stevens, in case that rift has the same degenerative effect on them as it does on our warp capability. We need to be prepared for an all-out attack once that Tholian ship returns with reinforcements.

Duffy was ready to answer, but instead was cut off by Carol Abramowitz.

Prepare all you want, she said, but were not going into battle. The cultural specialist was met with Corsis perturbed expression but continued unheeded. You can bet that our next orders will be to head home without the Defiant. No one is going to throw away the trust that diplomats and ambassadors have earned with the Tholians during the Dominion War. Unfortunately, an antique ship and a few engineers will be considered expendable.

Abramowitzs assessment matched his own, Duffy realized as he hung his head a bit. Captain Gold had told them all up front that the mission would be scuttled should any signs of eroding relations with the Tholians appear, and an exchange of fire definitely seemed to qualify as erosion to him. Diplomats were sure to exercise their influence to pull the da Vinci



from the mission, whether or not her crew was intact. He had to be ready to say good-bye to his captain,

his friends, and his . . . his . . .

Oh, Sonnie.

But Corsi did not appear content to keep her views to herself. What, were going to abandon the away team? The Tholians fired first! We didnt start this fight, but we damn well better finish it. Duffy watched as Corsi narrowed her eyes and scanned the others seated at the table for a sign of support before adding, Let them say what they want back on Earth. Regardless of whether we bring the Defiant home, were getting our away team back.

It is a bold stand you hope to take, Abramowitz replied, but I dont think youre being realistic. Her tone was clipped and polite, and Duffy knew it was a signal that she was already beginning to lose patience with the security chief. The womens dueling edginess would quickly become as volatile as a mix of matter and antimatter.

Realistic is a quantum torpedo, Corsi snapped. You think sweet-talking a Tholian at this point is- People!

Duffy was as surprised as everyone else when the word exploded from his mouth with such force and volume. All eyes turned to him, and no one said anything for several seconds, the only sounds audible in the room being that of the ventilation system and the omnipresent hum of the ships engines.

Taking a moment to clear his throat, he began again

in a more reserved tone. People, dont think for a minute that Captain Scott isnt doing everything he can on his end to keep us here. Dont stop believing that Captain Gold isnt working to get the Defiant to our side of the rift.

He paused, focusing on Corsi as she sat cross-armed in her chair. But were not disobeying any order that comes from Starfleet. For now, though, well focus on doing everything we can until that order comes down.

Silence hung in the briefing room as Duffy asserted his command over his fellow officers and friends. He racked his mind for some words of support and confidence, the kind of statements that seemed to roll off Captain Golds tongue in tough situations. Now was the time to be a captain, but all he felt like was a babysitter trying to quell a squabble between sisters

while Mom and Dad were at the holothater.  
I cant very well send them to their rooms.  
A flash of amber light caught Duffys eye as it  
glowed on the tabletop near Faulwells hand. The lin-guist  
tapped a control on the keypad near his arm,  
then looked up at Duffy with sympathetic eyes.  
Its an incoming message from Starfleet  
Command. Do you want to take it in private?  
Duffy shook his head. No. Put it on the viewer.  
As Captain Scotts wizened face filled the screen on  
the briefing rooms wall, Duffy felt some of the groups

tension seep away. The engineers creased visage, his  
friendly eyes, and the hint of a smile were just what  
everyone needed at that very moment.  
Its not the worst news Ill be bringin ye, Mr.  
Duffy, the face on the viewer began, but the situa-tion  
isnt good.  
Steeling himself for the report, Duffy nodded.  
Were ready.  
Scott drew a breath before continuing. Our  
ambassador to the Tholians is recommending that we  
scrap the mission. He wants the Federation to for-mally  
apologize to the commander of the ship ye fired  
on, and to the Magistrates of the Assembly. He says  
were on the brink of losin it all as far as relations are  
concerned, and that the Defiant isnt worth it.  
Duffys mind was numbed by Scotts words, which  
echoed those of Abramowitz moments before. Rather  
than lose his focus, though, Duffy fell back on his  
ready wit. And exactly how is this not the worst  
news, Captain?  
Scott allowed a small smile before replying. Weve  
got the support of Admiral Ross, and that carries a lot  
of weight with the Federation Council. The admiral is  
arguing for the da Vinci to hold its position, saying  
that it was poor frame of mind and the effects of  
interspace, not a botched cooperative effort, that led  
us to this point. He says that it just might be the  
Tholians who do the apologizin once this is all over.

Releasing a breath, Duffy relaxed a bit. So what do  
we do in the meantime?  
Tell me how your repairs are farin.  
It was a question Duffy hadnt expected, as he had  
explained to the S.C.E. leader in detail during their  
earlier conversation just what damage the starship  
had suffered. All systems are operational except for  
the warp drive, just like-

Ah, Scott said with a sigh that was almost too dramatic. And that's giving you lots of trouble to fix so close to the point of interphase, you say. No, sir, Duffy replied, his puzzlement growing by the second. Were almost- It may take hours to repair before you can even head back to Federation space. Realization finally dawned, and a smile spread across Duffy's face as he began to pick up on Captain Scott's lead. It was a look that was shared by everyone else at the table. Oh, yes, sir. I'd say at least three- Twelve hours to repair, you say? I'll let Admiral Ross know right away. Scott nodded grimly and twitched a cheek. Duffy almost laughed aloud. Did he just wink at me? Set your team to work, Mr. Duffy, Scott said, then adjusted his tone to a more serious timbre. But I'll be needing a word alone with you now. Here it comes, Duffy thought as everyone else rose

from their seats, moving with only slightly less speed than they might exhibit during an emergency evacuation of the ship. Only Stevens paused just long enough to offer a thumbs-up gesture and to mouth the words Good luck before he, too, was gone. In seconds Duffy was alone in the room, leaving him to look squarely at the viewer and ready to get called down by the chief of the S.C.E. himself.

Well, it was fun while it lasted. So long, and thanks for all the . . .

Mr. Duffy, the seasoned engineer said, did I ever tell you what the most frightening words I ever heard spoken on the bridge of a starship were? Duffy shook his head as the veteran engineer continued. Well, here they are Mr. Scott, you have the conn.

Duffy laughed in spite of himself, realizing now that the captain understood his plight all too well. He didn't know many engineers who had risen through the ranks of command, at least not the engineers he perceived as being cut from the same cloth as he was. After all, why would an engineer want to command a starship rather than spend that time tearing it apart and putting it back together?

An engineer's job isn't just to keep a starship running. It's to keep her crew safe, said Scott. Some of the best years I had in Starfleet were when I was third in command of the Enterprise. Keeping the crew safe; that's what I kept in mind every time I had to sit in the

center seat.

Mr. Duffy, Im gonna level with ye. That diplomat Marshall wants to hang this whole mess on you. He thinks that an immature officer, a mere engineer unfit for command caused the whole thing. Scott leaned forward, his eyes fixing on the younger man. I know hes wrong. Well show him hes wrong, Mr. Duffy. Pride. Thats what shone in Captain Scotts eyes as he spoke. Pride in the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, pride in the crew of the da Vinci, pride in the engineer who stepped from third in command to leading a ship in a mission that now was so much more than sal-vaging a relic from a bygone era.

I can do this.

Yes, we will, Captain, said Duffy, now rising from his chair. Just buy me the time.

Scott nodded a few times, forcing his lips together tightly in a small frown. To Kieran Duffy, the old engi-neer appeared lost in his thoughts.

Laddie, once I thought I was leavin my captain in that same damnable place. Ill push like hell to keep ye from thinkin the same. Scott out.

With only the light from her helmet lamps to guide the way and the sound of her own breathing to keep her company, Gomez pulled herself through the Jefferies tube and deeper into the bowels of the Defiant. Despite there being no gravity to impede her progress or to grab her and send her plunging head-long down a maintenance shaft, it was still difficult going. Her environment suit, designed for use in open space or on the exposed surface of an otherwise inhospitable planet, only seemed to hamper her movements here. Junctions and intersections were particularly challenging, as she had to be aware of snagging her suit on exposed controls or anything else sticking out from the sides of the crawlway.

## CHAPTER

### 3

And on top of it all, the walls were closing in on her. She was sure of it.

The thought came unbidden, surging to the front of her consciousness. She knew it was an odd notion and completely baseless, but she couldnt shake it.

The Jefferies tube was contracting around her. The walls threatened to crush the life out of her, chased back only when she shone her light at them.

The tube is not getting smaller, Gomez scolded

herself. It's your imagination, so get over it and keep moving. And so she did, pulling her weightless body through the crawlspace as quickly as she could, and doing her best to ignore the oppressive advance of the walls around her.

Movement ahead caught her attention, along with a swath of color contrasting with the dull gray dominating the rest of the tunnel. Gomez paused in her crawling, orienting herself so that her helmet lamps could illuminate the section of tube ahead of her. Her eyes focused on the source of the movement, and she felt a shiver travel the entire length of her body.

It was the skeleton of yet another Defiant crewmember, dressed in a red jumpsuit and floating freely in the confines of the Jefferies tube. The bones of the feet were bare, and there was no sign of the boots the man had once worn.

Man? Woman? Gomez had no idea what gender the crewmember might have been. She was only reason-

ably sure that the skeleton was even human. Had this person been an engineer, toiling away in the depths of the starship, only to be overcome by the effects of interspace? He or she had been isolated here, cut off from the rest of the ship's crew. A maintenance crawlway seemed to Gomez to be a particularly lonely place to die.

However, that thought didn't bother her nearly as much as the realization that the skeleton of the hapless victim was blocking her path through the Jefferies tube. She would have to maneuver past the dead crewman in order to continue forward.

Dear God . . . she whispered, noticing the shake in her voice as the words escaped her lips. There was no way she could allow herself to touch the skeleton. The very idea of coming into contact with the crewman's remains revolted her.

What the hell's the matter with me? Her mind screamed the question at her. She had to press forward, of course. It was the only way to get to Lense and Pattie. That's what she needed to focus on, not the tightness of the crawlspace or the lifeless body floating before her or . . .

Stop it! she shouted, her voice echoing in the confines of her helmet. Then she remained in place for the additional couple of minutes it took to bring her rapid breathing down to something approaching normal. You can do this, she told herself. You have to.

Pattie and Elizabeth need you.

Yes, that was it. She needed to concentrate on Pattie and Lense and the fact that they were trapped outside the ship and needed her help to get back inside.

Gomez to Lense, she called out as she activated her communicator, painfully aware of the detectable nervousness in her voice. How are you making out? Hows Pattie?

Im at the airlock, Sonya, the doctor replied.

Pattie is still unconscious, but her readings are stable.

She, too, had apparently noticed Gomez's anxiety.

Are you okay? Is something wrong?

Gomez forced herself to take several deep breaths before replying. It would do no good to display any false bravado, she knew, as Lense would see through the facade with little effort. Better to be open about what was troubling her.

Im feeling a bit claustrophobic, Elizabeth, she admitted. Ive spent my fair share of time crawling around Jefferies tubes, but Ive never felt like this before. And theres something else. In halting, hushed tones, Gomez described the body blocking her path in the crawlway.

Enough of this! It was time to move, she decided.

Lense and Pattie didnt have all day to wait on her to get her act together. With a final, cleansing breath, she reached for a handhold and began to pull herself forward once more.

Im moving again, Elizabeth, she said, hoping her voice sounded more confident to the doctor than it did to her.

Good, Lense replied. Sonya, just talk to me if you start to feel nervous or uneasy again.

Okay, Gomez said, nodding though there was no one around to see the action. She didnt care, her attention instead riveted on the task at hand. She closed her eyes and focused on the technical schematic Soloman had shown her, displaying the memorized route to the airlock in her minds eye. Her concentration faltered, though, when she felt her hand brush across something that was most definitely not part of the Jefferies tube. It was soft, yielding to her touch, and it moved slightly at her approach.

The crewman.

Almost immediately Gomez felt her pulse begin to quicken and her breathing accelerate. Still, she kept pushing forward, gritting her teeth and clenching her eyes closed even tighter as she felt the skeleton of the dead crewmember begin to pass down the length of

her environment suit. Her mind tortured her with images of bones shifting beneath the material of the crewmans jumpsuit. Could she actually hear the sound of those bones rubbing against one another? And then, the one thing she feared most happened. She stopped moving.

Still gripping a handhold, Gomez tried to pull her-self forward again but failed. She was stuck. Without thinking, she opened her eyes, only to see the skull of the doomed crewman plastered against the faceplate of her helmet.

The scream that tore itself from her throat echoed in the narrow width of the crawlway.

Sonya! Lenses voice called out over her commu-nicator. What is it?

Gomez didnt respond. She tuned out her stranded teammate as she thrashed about, flailing her arms and kicking her legs against the sides of the tunnel in a frantic effort to free herself. One hand swiped at the skull still leering at her, forcing it away and up toward the ceiling of the tube. She felt something snap like brittle wood splintering and then she was free, pulling herself once more through the tunnel with no thought as to getting snagged on some projection or slamming headfirst into a wall or maintenance hatch.

Suddenly the cramped walls of the Jefferies tube fell away, and Gomez spilled into one of the Defiants corridors. She barely managed to throw her arms out ahead of her, preventing herself from careening into the passageways far bulkhead. As her hands touched the wall, instinct and training took over, orienting her body so that her magnetized boots could rest once again on the cold, dusty deck.

Sonya? Lense repeated. Answer me. Are you all

right?

Taking a moment to gather herself, Gomez forced away the lingering images of the crewmans body and the way the skeletons fragile remains had given way under her panicked assault as she fought to extricate herself from the crawlway.

Im . . . Im fine, Elizabeth. Now, at least. But were going to have Soloman find us another way back to the bridge, if its all the same to you.

Right now, the doctor replied, Id just be happy to be inside the ship.

A small chuckle broke through Gomezs remaining anxiety, bringing a much-needed smile to her face as

she started down the corridor, examining directional signs on the bulkheads as she went. It didnt take long to find the room containing the maintenance airlock, as well as a collection of lockers holding environment suits and assorted engineering tools. If time hadnt been an issue, Gomez might have taken a few minutes to examine the century-old equipment and marvel at how well it had been preserved by the lack of atmosphere on the ship.

Instead, she turned her attention to the airlock itself. A moments work with her manual door opener succeeded in coaxing the airlock hatch open and revealing the welcome sight of Elizabeth Lense. The doctor was still cradling the unconscious Pattie in her arms.

How is she? Gomez asked as she helped lower the Nasat to the deck. She held Patties still form down as Lense reached for her tricorder, but to Gomezs surprise, she was the first object of the doctors scrutiny rather than Pattie.

Just as I suspected, Lense said as she snapped the tricorder closed and reached for the medical kit on her belt. The theragen I gave you has begun to wear off. Youve started to feel the effects of interspace. Gomezs sigh was a mixture of relief and apprehension as she allowed herself to relax somewhat and sag against the nearby bulkhead. At least now she knew that the feelings of panic and uncertainty shed been experiencing had an external cause, and werent due to her own failings. On the other hand, she hadnt expected the inoculations Lense had given them all to lose their effectiveness so quickly.

As if anticipating Gomezs question, Lense said, Being in the rift might be having a more intense effect on us than merely being in proximity to it. I should give the entire away team another dose as soon as possible.

With hypospray in hand, the doctor reached for Gomezs right shoulder and placed the injector into the pressurized receptacle located there. The connection was designed expressly for the purpose of allowing injections into a suits occupant when circumstances didnt allow for the removal of the helmet,

making it easy to provide medical treatment in almost any environment. Once she had administered the theragen to Gomez, she repeated the process on herself. I didnt expect to have to give booster shots so



soon, if at all, Lense said. If we cant get out of the rift before my supply of theragen is exhausted, we could be in serious trouble.

Gomez thought about the near hysteria she had endured in the Jefferies tube. Knowing that those feelings were nothing compared to what she might experience should the away team be exposed to the full effects of the rift now filled her with a pro-nounced sense of dread.

His thoughts concentrated somewhere beyond the image displayed on the da Vincis main viewer, Duffy sat in the captains chair, staring into the reaches of starry space. His eyes followed a glowing ribbon of energy projecting from the starships deflector dish as it lanced outward, then narrowed to a point near the center of the viewscreen. Somewhere out there, he hoped, the beam would find a crack or seam, any-thing that could be seized upon and forced open and give the da Vinci access to the interdimensional rift that had reclaimed the Defiant, along with their own away team.

As a young boy on Earth, Duffy had sometimes entertained himself with thoughts of contacting a

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### 4

passing ship of alien spacefarers. Armed with the biggest portable beacon his father owned, he would slip from his home in the dark of night and settle him-self on a grassy rise in the backyard. There he would activate the beacon and point it into the night sky. Sometimes his fingers fiddled with the beacons switch, making the beam of light pulse at random. Other times he would allow it to burn steadily for what seemed to him like hours. He would sprawl in the grass, paying little mind to the closely shorn blades prickling the back of his neck as he looked sky-ward and hoped that maybe this would be the night that the captain of a Vulcan science ship or a curious Pygorian trader would stop by for a visit.

Duffys posture slumped a bit in the center seat as he recalled the night he had told his father that he wouldnt need the beacon anymore. His father had patted him on the shoulder and encouraged him to keep it at his bedside, should he ever change his mind. The response of his young voice rang in Duffys memory.

Thats okay, Dad. You can keep it. Im tired of just watching the light. No one ever comes.

He tried to fend off the ironic ring of his memories as the deflector beam pierced the blackness. He continued to watch it for a few seconds longer, then turned reluctantly from the viewscreen toward the science station.

Anything?

No detectable changes, Fabian Stevens replied. When he volunteered for a duty shift on the bridge, he typically had his eye on the tacticians seat. Now he had taken the post of the ships science officer, monitoring the area of the rift for any effect from the deflector beams attempt to influence it. Ive got nothing, Duff, but the rift is hard enough to read when its open.

Im not asking for much here, said Duffy to no one in particular, letting his frustration saturate his words. It was their third attempt at massaging the area of interphase into a premature opening, and Duffys hopes for success were fading. With the Tholians bound to return to the area at any time, he knew that merely idling here for three more hours and awaiting the rifts next predicted opening was not the most prudent course of action.

I dont want the fabric of space torn wide open, he said. Im just looking for a little rip. Even a snag. Stevens smirked at Duffy. Maybe we could send in a torpedo loaded with a batch of P-s?

An unexpected yet quite welcome laugh burst from Duffys mouth. Despite the seriousness of their current situation, he couldnt help but recall their recent and memorable mission involving the fabled P-s. It had happened a few months before, when the da Vinci had come across a drifting Pakled craft. At first

the vessel appeared to have been disabled after an attack of unknown origin. Duffy, Stevens, and a few da Vinci technicians had beamed over to lend a hand, only to learn that the Pakled crew was trying to repair practically every onboard system. Their ship, Duffy quickly learned, had suffered a cascading circuitry overload following the crews attempt at adapting an official Romulan cloaking device to their ships computer defense systems.

Both Duffy and Stevens had then been forced to exercise every scrap of self-control they possessed so as not to fall over laughing when the captain of the Pakled vessel told them that a Ferengi businessman was the source of the supposed cloaking device.

The electromagnetic pulse that resulted from engaging their new contraption had fried practically everything connected to a power source, including life-support systems, distress beacons, and even handheld devices hooked to charging ports. It was fortunate happenstance that the da Vinci had stumbled upon the dying craft at all, and the S.C.E. team had been viewed by the Pakleds as a mixture of magicians and divine agents.

What dazzled the stranded crew the most, Duffy and Stevens noted, seemed to be the teams use of what Starfleet personnel called a P-. When gripped between thumb and forefinger, the small device could, at the press of a button, emit focused frequen-

cies of light and sound that were perfect for freeing the covers of circuit panels fused shut from the electric backlash of the contraband cloaking device.

Neither of the officers had the heart to tell the Pakleds that their wondrous P-s were basically glorified Starfleet-issue can openers.

Duffy brought his smile under control long enough to mimic the Pakled captains words to Stevens. You make things open. That is good.

The two laughed again. Thats us, Duffy said, curbing his laughter. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers Miracle Workers for the Alpha Quadrant and beyond.

Duffys face sobered a bit as he looked to the viewscreen again.

Nothing.

If anything qualifies as beyond right about now, its the Defiant.

Its not working, he said, his words tinged with disgust. Shut it down, Fabian. Duffy paused as he watched the golden-hued ray snap out of existence with not a shimmer of the rift he had hoped against hope to see. Analyze the latest set of sensor readings and let me know when youre ready to try it again.

Sure, Duff, Stevens replied as he turned back to his console. Fourth one makes the charm, right?

Thats what the Andorians always say.

Duffys attention was drawn by the opening of the

turbolift doors, from which emerged another reminder of the masked dangers awaiting those who merely occupied this area of space. Armed with a hypospray, Nurse Sandy Wetzel stepped onto the bridge and cut a path directly to Duffy.

Commander, she said, I need to administer ther-agen

boosters to everyone. Dr. Lenses orders were for the shots to be given out if she wasn't back by hours.

Duffy nodded, remembering Lenses report from her earlier briefing. The effectiveness of the theragen treatment received by the entire crew would weaken over time and require bolstering through additional inoculations.

Fire away, he said, craning his neck to allow the nurse access. As the spray hissed below his ear, he had a momentary pang of concern as he thought once more about the substance being pumped into his bloodstream.

Actually a Klingon nerve gas that was instantly lethal in its purest form, the theragen derivative was also the da Vinci crew's best defense against slipping into the same space madness that had gripped those aboard the Defiant a century ago. Duffy, for one, was thankful for the medicine. The last thing he needed right now, on top of everything else, was to have to cope with a mentally unstable crew.

As Wetzel finished inoculating him, Duffy said,

Thanks, Sandy. How's Songmin doing?

Wetzel had been the first of the medical team to report to the bridge during the Tholian attack that had interrupted the da Vincis recovery operation and sent the Defiant plunging back into the interspatial rift. She had arrived to find the usual assortment of bumps, cuts, and bruises except for the more seriously injured helmsman, Ensign Songmin Wong.

Were treating him for a concussion, she replied.

He'll be released for duty after a night's rest.

Duffy nodded thankfully as Wetzel moved to the helmsman now seated at Wong's usual position. Then his attention was drawn to the communications station, where an animated discussion looked to be taking place between Carol Abramowitz and Bart Faulwell. The two had been hard at work since Duffy had returned from his private conversation with Captain Scott. He'd been too busy to wonder what they'd been up to before now, but as he watched their exchange for several more seconds, he decided that this was the time to find out.

He walked toward them, trying to be obvious about his approach, but the two didn't flinch. Abramowitz leaned forward in her seat, occasionally keying commands as the tall, lean Faulwell stood beside her, both remaining intently focused on their work. Then Duffy noticed that they were both straining to listen to small

Feinberg audio receivers plugged into their ears. Who

were they talking to? What in the hell was going on?

Speaking softly, he said, Hello? Heh-LO-oh.

The best comparison Duffy could make to the sound that came out of Abramowitz's mouth was that of a tribble freshly tossed into a Klingon's lap. The cultural specialist's eyes widened in momentary shock as she registered Duffy's presence, her surprise nearly jerking her against the back of her chair. Duffy chuck-led at her response, but neither she nor Faulwell seemed amused at the interruption.

Im sorry, Commander, she said, regaining some of her composure. I guess we were somewhere else. Where?

Faulwell couldn't seem to help the hint of a proud smile starting to creep onto his face. Truth be told, Mr. Duffy, I was giving Carol here a lesson in Tholian cryptography. We've been reviewing some of the coded messages between the commander of the Tholian ship and his contact on their homeworld. You may find this interesting.

Duffy didn't try to hide his surprise as he looked to Abramowitz. Coded messages? You mean you tapped into their communications? He couldn't help but be amused when Abramowitz didn't reply immediately, but instead actually shuffled her feet, as if uncertain how to answer his question.

Um, I kind of intercepted and recorded all of the transmissions to and from the Tholian ship while we

were maintaining contact. She shrugged her shoulders and widened her eyes, the very picture of innocence. Maybe I hit the wrong button?

For nearly every moment since the attack, Duffy had been gripped with apprehension that he had somehow unwittingly prompted the Tholians' actions, and that something he had done or ordered had resulted in the Defiant and his teammates being lost in the rift. He saw now that his friends had probably harbored similar concerns, and had channeled that anxiety toward finding an answer. Maybe the true motivation behind the attack was somewhere in these transmissions, just waiting to be discovered.

That's very, um . . . damn, Carol. You're good.

Abramowitz smiled. I listened in once or twice, but I couldn't make sense of any of it. Tholian speech sounds like someone grinding glass, let alone whatever scrambling protocols they add. I thought it would

be useless to us, until I talked to Bart.

Aside from being a master linguist, Bartholomew Faulwell had been steadily carving a reputation for himself in Starfleet circles as a crack cryptographer. One of the oldest members of the da Vinci crew, Faulwell had been one of a legion of minds tapped by Starfleet brass during the Dominion War to aid in sift-ing through enemy communications. His quick and accurate translations of garbled or encrypted trans-missions had proved vital to admirals planning strate-

gic moves for the allied forces. Had the war still been waging, Duffy knew that the S.C.E. would most cer-tainly not be reaping the benefits of Faulwells skills.

Faulwell let his smile grow a bit as he patted Abramowitz on the shoulder. We dont know much, but its a start. Tholian communique are typically brief, probably out of fear that somebody will try to do just what were doing. We can tell you one thing for certain, though. Our escort ship was ordered to fire on the Defiant, and on us, by the Assembly. Duffys brow knit in confusion. So they didnt just go space-happy, then. Any clues as to why they attacked us?

Absolutely, Faulwell replied. The last thing sent to the Assembly before returning the order to fire was the same tricorder information that Captain Gold sent to us from the Defiant about whatever it was the away team found.

Of course, Duffy thought. The away team had found a mechanism of Tholian design stored in one of the Defiants cargo bays. After recording detailed scans of the device, Captain Gold had notified the commander of the Tholian ship, Nostrene, about their discovery. And naturally, things had gone to hell shortly after-ward. So what is it about that gadget that has the Tholians all worked up? he asked. Based on the information P Blue had gathered and on the theory

she had put forth, Duffy and Stevens had figured out that the strange device found by the away team was some sort of power emitter. Using that as a starting point, they had scoured the da Vincis databanks for all references to Tholian encounters by Starfleet ships. Sensor scans recorded by various vessels during those engagements supported Patties hypothesis that the mechanism she had found was similar in design to those employed by Tholian ships to gener-ate their infamous energy webs. But what was so secret about that? The Federation had known about

the Tholians web technology for more than a century. What was so special about this particular piece of equipment?

Duffy shook his head in growing frustration. He wasn't used to not having all the pieces to a puzzle within easy reach. As an engineer, he prided himself on being able to see to the heart of any problem based solely on the evidence available to him at the time.

The answers were here, he knew, somewhere in the midst of the data gathered by the da Vincis sensors or by the away team. It would simply require more time to sift through it. Time, however, was something he was quickly running out of.

Still, he did have enough time to show his gratitude to a pair of specialists willing to take the mugato by the horn. It was just such initiative that made Duffy appreciate the rewards of command.

This is great, you two, he said, returning his attention to Faulwell. I'll make sure to report this to Captain Gold after I buy you both dinner at the best restaurant aboard this ship. He smiled again. Once this is all over, Bart, you'll have plenty of new material to write Anthony about.

Commander Duffy!

It was Lieutenant David McAllan. More so than the words themselves, the sound of alarm coming from the da Vincis typically reserved tactical officer caught the entire bridge crew off guard and made Duffy jerk his head in the direction of the tactical station.

You need to see this, McAllan said, his face not turning from his console viewer. As Duffy started in that direction, he was followed not only by Stevens but also by Domenica Corsi, whom Duffy knew was just waiting at her security officers post for any sign of trouble. Duffy hoped this would end up disappointing her.

Looking up from his console, the tactical officer's face was pale as he said, Its the Tholians, Commander. Long-range sensors have just picked up six ships heading this way at maximum warp, and . . .

And what, Lieutenant? Duffy looked down at the console's tactical viewer, which depicted six solid blips, representations of Tholian ships, flying in a hexagonal configuration. Amid the configuration was

something that Duffy had a hard time discerning from the viewer.

Sensors read it as pure energy, McAllan reported. Its fluctuating slightly in intensity, but keeping pace with the Tholian ships.

Judging from the readings, Duffy saw that the energy output was intense, incorporating the power of a dozen photon torpedo explosions in a stable field or cloud. . . .

Or a web.

Stevens elbowed his way past Duffy to get a look for himself, tapping a few commands on the consoles smooth surface and pausing to read the streams of data now scrolling next to the tactical image. He laughed in spite of his assessment of it all.

Now thats pretty clever! Stevens looked back up at Duffy, his smile evident but quickly fading. Clever strictly from a tactical point of view, I mean. Sorry, Duff.

Duffy decided not to dampen Stevenss enthusiasm. It was just that kind of appreciation for the enemy that would motivate the tactical expert to calculate the appropriate defense against them. Fabian, is that what I think it is?

It is, if you think its an energy field capable of fry-ing the systems of several starships at once. Stevens studied the tactical viewer once more and nodded. Those ships are generating a net of power thats a

thousand meters in diameter, Duff. Think of it as a massive butterfly net, and guess who the butterfly is. Duffy weighed his options for the da Vinci Hold the ships position and become ensnared in the Tholians deadly web, or retreat and lose their fix on the inter-spatial rift, as well as their away team, for good.

How much time do we have, Fabian?

Stevenss expression was grave as he consulted his console one last time. If they maintain their speed, the Tholians will be here in about an hour.

Captains log stardate .. My engineer and sci-ence officer have spent the past twelve hours examining the alien object recovered from the destroyed Klingon colony on Traelus II. They theorize that, when combined with other similar devices we found deployed at equidistant positions around the colonys perimeter, it generated an energy field enshrouding the entire settlement. Residual energy traces recorded by the landing party indicate the field was lethal to any living being within its sphere of influence. Judging by the condition of the Klingon bodies we found, it wasnt a particularly



pleasant way to die, either.

David Gold could almost feel his blood chill as he once again regarded the image of Thomas Blair, the

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### 5

late captain of the Defiant. Unlike the log entries they had reviewed earlier, the Blair in this excerpt didnt possess the haunted, exhausted expression that would dominate his features in those later recordings.

Then again, Gold mused soberly, he didnt know he was going to die at this point.

Well, he said, this would certainly go a long way toward explaining why the Tholians were so upset earlier.

Gomez replied, So the Defiant crew found the colony, took the web generator for study, and then fell into the rift while evading Tholian vessels and trying to get the evidence back to Starfleet Command.

At the science station, Soloman said, There is no evidence to . . . suggest that the Tholians had knowl-edge of the Defiants actions before it became . . . trapped in the rift.

Gold shrugged but nodded in agreement. Perhaps. Its never been discussed in an open forum, thats for sure.

It would not be a . . . wise course of action, the Bynar replied. According to sensor data I have exam-ined . . . along with reports filed by the . . . landing party, the colony was defenseless, particularly by . . . Klingon standards. The Tholians attacked a . . . group of unarmed civilians.

From where she knelt next to a seated and now con-scious P Blue, Dr. Lense looked up from tending the

Nasats head injury. Why would they do that? I mean, the Tholians are aggressive, but isnt that a bit extreme?

Gold shook his head. We know that the Tholians have always been fiercely protective of their space. I guess we just didnt realize at the time to what lengths they would go in the interests of that protection.

All this time, Gomez said, the Defiant held the key to a terrible secret.

It still does, Gold replied. The Klingons never found out what happened at Traelus II, and by all reports they were more than a bit upset over the inci-dent. If word of the Tholians involvement reaches the Klingons now, some in the Empire may well want vengeance.

So the Tholians try to destroy us, only we get pulled back into the rift, Lense said. Lucky us. What about the da Vinci? Pattie asked, her voice weak and tired.

Gold strolled around the bridges upper deck in the Nasats direction, talking as he went. Well, either Mr. Duffy followed orders and evacuated the area, or he was forced to fight. In that case, the da Vinci disabled the Tholian vessel . . . or she didnt.

The statement hung in the air for several seconds, with no one on the bridge wanting to respond. Realizing the somber mood he had inflicted on his people, Gold rallied quickly.

At any rate, Im afraid we have more pressing con-cerns.

Turning his attention to P Blue, he asked, Pattie? How are you feeling?

Pattie nodded slowly. I will recover, Captain.

Turning to Lense, she added, Many pardons for the trouble I caused you, Doctor.

Lense patted the Nasat on the nearest of her eight limbs, then rose to her feet to face Gold. She ran a hand through her matted hair, thankful for finally being able to remove her environment suits helmet. Ive treated her concussion, Captain. Shell have a headache for a bit, but its the best I can do until we get her back to the da Vinci.

Gold nodded. Well see to that as best we can, Doctor.

The attention of everyone on the bridge was caught as the overhead lighting dimmed and the displays on the various consoles flickered. Gold could even hear the mild hiss of the air-circulation system fade momentarily.

Whats that about? he asked.

Soloman was already examining the sensor data being relayed to the science station. We are experi-encing . . . a power fall-off. It is affecting all . . . of the generators we brought with us from the da Vinci.

How bad is it? Gomez asked as she moved to the bridges engineering station.

At the current rate of drop-off, the Bynar replied,

the generators will be completely drained . . . of power in less than two hours.

Damn, Gomez spat, drawing a questioning look from Gold and the others. With an embarrassed expression on her face, she said, Kieran suggested that we bring along backup power supplies for the

generators, but I decided against that. She shook her head in disgust. The generators can normally operate for days without interruption, and I figured we'd be here for eight to ten hours at most. By then, the *Da Vinci* would have pulled us out of the rift.

Something tells me that Mr. Duffy will have plenty of colorful observations about all of this when we get back, Lense said. Looking at the viewscreen and the matte of darkness that had once been the opening to the rift, she added, That is, if we get back.

Enough of that, Gold snapped. We've just been given a deadline for getting out of here, people, and we can't afford to waste time with defeatist gabbing. Turning to the science station, he asked, Soloman, can you calculate the time until the next interphase? The Bynar spent several moments peering into the console's viewfinder before turning back to the group with a troubled expression on his face.

According to the data I have . . . at my disposal, the next interphase should occur in . . . three hours and twelve minutes.

Gold absorbed the report. It was simple to under-

stand, really. The power supplies of the generators would be exhausted more than an hour before the next interphase.

Why didn't we register the power drain before? he asked.

It was Gomez who replied. Up until the attack, the *Defiant* was always on the threshold of the rift. Now that we were completely enveloped in interspace, the negative effects associated with it must be intensified.

What about the power cells in our suits? Pattie asked. They should be affected as well.

Gomez activated her tricorder and quickly scanned her suits control panel, located on her left sleeve.

There is a minor power drain, but it's not alarming. She frowned at the tricorder readings. They should be fine at least until the next interphase, but I'm not sure I'd bet on them.

Well, it's all we have for now, Gold said. So rather than worry about it, I think we'd be better served by finding a way out of here. Looking over at Soloman, he said, Give me a scan of the rift opening, or at least the area where it used to be.

Soloman turned to the sensor displays once more, his small hands playing over the controls of the science station. Gold noted with satisfaction that the Bynar had become so fluent with the antiquated control panels that one would think he had been born to

serve on this ship. Soloman seemed quite at home there, the da Vinci captain thought, toiling away at the science station with the viewfinders telltale blue glow washing over his face. It was in stark contrast to the rest of the bridge illumination that reflected off the back of his pale, bald head.

The Bynars head . . . so small and fragile. Gold imagined he could feel the smooth texture of Solomans skin beneath his fingers, could almost feel the curve of his skull as he at first caressed, then pressed harder, yearning to hear the final satisfying crack of the slim neck supporting-

What?

Gold wasnt aware that hed fallen until his tailbone struck the deck and the back of his head smacked against the side of the captains chair. The dull ache from the dual impacts had barely begun to assert itself before he felt a hand on his arm.

Captain, are you all right? Lense asked, already waving her tricorder near the area of his head that had struck the chair.

Reaching up to wipe his brow, Gold blinked several times in an attempt to reorient himself. He looked up to see the entire away team staring down at him, nearly identical expressions of concern etched on their faces.

Am I? I . . . I dont know, he said, his voice unsteady. One minute I was watching Soloman

working, and the next I was . . . I was imagining . . .

The murderous anxiety he had felt only seconds before threatened to wash over him again, and he bit down on the rest of the sentence, leaving the remain-ing words unspoken.

Lense lowered her tricorder. The theragen in your system has begun to lose its effectiveness. She retrieved a hypospray from her medical kit and checked its setting. Its as if were all building up a tolerance for the drug. Shaking her head, she added, Im going to increase the dosage for all of us, but at this rate, my supply wont last more than a few hours.

Gold cast a final, guilty look at Soloman as he drew a deep breath to calm himself. The horrid vision that had filled his mind only moments before continued to burn in his memory. Even as the theragen took hold in his bloodstream and he felt the anxiety that had gripped him begin to dissipate, he knew that the image of his hands closing around the Bynars head

would haunt him long after this mission was over.

Soloman, he said in a subdued voice, what did your sensor scans reveal?

There are . . . residual energy traces indicating the rifts entrance, sir, Soloman replied. I am able to determine the boundaries of the opening.

If we can detect it, Gomez said, then maybe we can find a way to force it open.

Rising from his seat, Soloman said, Opening the rift may not present . . . much difficulty, Commander.

A great deal of force may not . . . be required.

How so? Gold asked.

I see what he means, Gomez cut in. When the da Vincis deflector and tractor beams were locked onto us, the interspatial pocket seemed to react in the opposite direction, exerting more and more force to hold us here. But we might be able to overcome that resistance by pushing ourselves through the rift from within.

Gold frowned, not entirely convinced. With what?

The Defiants maneuvering thrusters couldnt possibly be strong enough to push us out.

It was Pattie who provided one possible solution.

Perhaps the warp drive could be used.

Gomez made no effort to hide the skepticism on her face as she regarded the Nasat. The warp engines are as cold as ice, Pattie. The dilithium crystals have decayed to nothing, and even if we had one, wed still have to find the right intermix formula. It would take at least thirty minutes to initiate a restart of the warp core. And then theres always the possibility that the engines wont stand the strain of restarting and will buckle completely.

Pattie shook her head as she rose from her seat at the bridges communications console. No, no. My apologies for not explaining myself. I was thinking

that we could use the generators we brought with us to provide a quick start to the warp drive. The action would almost certainly drain the generators within seconds, but it should be enough to provide a short-duration warp pulse that could push us through the rift.

Why does that sound as crazy as I think it does?

Lense asked.

But Gomez was nodding at the Nasats idea. No, its not crazy. Ive seen something like it done before, when I was on the Enterprise. She quickly relayed the

story of the time that Geordi La Forge, the Enterprises chief engineer, and the son of the ships doctor had devised a scheme to jump-start the warp engines of an eighty-year-old starship. They had used a minute amount of dilithium and some antimatter that the boy had retrieved from one of his ongoing science experiments. The warp pulse had lasted only two seconds, but it was enough to get the old ship out of harms way when a renegade Ferengi marauder showed up and attempted to hijack the vessel. The generators might be able to provide the necessary power for such a pulse, she said. But even if we can manage that, is there any antimatter down in engineering? Anything in the warp core itself would have been automatically ejected from the ship once power was lost, Pattie replied. But there may still be some in

magnetic storage bottles.

Gold had until this point stood silently, observing with unabashed admiration as his engineering specialists talked out their makeshift plan. Watching his people in their element always gave him the feeling that there was no problem they couldnt solve, no obstacle they couldnt overcome.

What do you think, Commander? he asked Gomez. Can we do it?

Gomez rubbed her chin thoughtfully. Well need to use at least three of the generators to trigger the warp engine restart. That will leave two to provide power for the thrusters and the bridge systems.

We can use the thrusters to maneuver closer to the edge of the rift, Pattie added. The effect of the warp fields abrupt activation should provide enough disruption to open the rift and push us through.

Gomez shook her head slowly. Well only get one shot at this, though. If the restart is successful and doesnt shred the warp engines, it will drain the power from the generators within seconds.

Gold liked the bold plan being presented by his officers. Given a choice between actively seeking a way out of their predicament or simply waiting for their power systems to deplete themselves, he preferred the more aggressive option. He had never been one to sit idly by and wait for fate or luck to visit him, not when he had the opportunity to fashion his own course of

action.

Besides, he wasnt ready to abandon the Defiant just

yet, not while any chance of salvaging her still remained. He knew that the ship held a political powder keg in its cargo hold, but he refused to accept that, after all they had ultimately sacrificed, the deaths of the men and women aboard the Defiant would amount to nothing more than the spark to ignite an interstellar war.

Maybe it doesn't have to be that way.

The thought came unbidden, catching Gold by surprise. Did it mean what he thought it meant? Could he bring himself to destroy the evidence the Defiant's crew had recovered and tried to bring home when fate had cruelly intervened?

It would be so easy to do, ordering the ship to travel deeper into the rift. Maybe they'd tumble into the other universe, forever lost to any recovery attempts from their own side of interspace. He could give the necessary orders, and he was confident that his crew would understand his reasoning. The greater political good would be served.

But not Captain Blair and his people, Gold reminded himself. They wouldn't be served at all.

No matter the consequences, it would do the Defiant crew a tremendous disservice to cover up the details of their last mission for the sake of political expediency. Therefore, he would do everything in his

power to see the vessel, and its crew, returned safely home.

Dismissing the troubling thoughts, Gold said, "Let's get started, then. Sonya, take Pattie and Dr. Lense to assist you. Soloman and I will remain here and guide the ship to the edge of the rift. He smiled grimly at his team. Work quickly, people. Time is most definitely not our ally today.

Like it ever is, Lense said as she donned her helmet in preparation for the journey down to engineering. Gomez smiled to herself as she added, "It just wouldn't be an S.C.E. mission without a time crunch."

The last time Duffy had sat in the da Vincis briefing room, he had been thankful for Captain Scott's words of advice. He'd also been buoyed by the captain's attempts to buy them the time they needed to salvage their mission and come home from Tholian space with a lost starship, or at least with every member of the da Vincis crew. Now all Duffy could think was that the veteran leader of the engineering troubleshooters

had wasted his efforts.

Within half an hour the six Tholian ships they had detected would be here, bringing with them their massive energy net and looking to snare anything in their collective path, most notably the da Vinci. It wouldn't have mattered now if ol Scotty had

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bought us a year. If we're not out of here before long, we're done for.

He shook off the thought and focused his eyes once again on the briefing room's main viewer and its projection of the tactical image that had burned itself into his mind not more than thirty minutes earlier.

Okay, let's go over it one more time. Run it again, Fabian.

Stevens entered a series of commands into the key-pad next to the viewer and the image reset itself. Six cones representing Tholian ships en route to the da Vinci's current position now glowed a threatening red in the screen's upper-left corner.

Amid the cones was an amber-colored grid, seemingly innocuous on the screen but representing the potential to destroy the da Vinci in one fell swoop.

Just below and to the right of the screen's center was a soft blue dot for the da Vinci, which Duff's ever-wicked mind underscored with the caption "You are here, just to lighten his mental load." To the virtual da Vinci's right was a field of blue, a computer-simulated haze marking the area of interphase that, up until now, had drawn the bulk of Duff's attention.

Stevens tapped once more and the tactical image sprang to life. The six cones bore down on the da Vinci in formation.

This variety of the Tholian web has never been observed in the field by anyone from Starfleet, he

said as he pointed to the configuration of red and amber shapes. It differs from the web employed by Tholian ships for more than a hundred years, which was literally spun around a craft, then constricted. Once the energy field made contact, the trapped ship was powerless at best, or destroyed.

That seems like a lot of energy to maintain among those ships, Domenica Corsi said, her brow knitting in confusion as she studied the computer model.

Why did they engage the web so far from our position?

Stevens shrugged. Who can tell? Maybe they hoped it would act as a deterrent. If I were in a



Tholian ship, I'd rather scare an enemy away than engage one in combat. Even with the web drawing its energy from their ships warp fields, as I'm guessing it does, flying around at high warp with that thing glow-ing hot is still a safer alternative for the Tholians than getting shot at.

That made sense to Duffy. The Tholians probably charged their energy web many more times than they actually used it. Even theories on the widespread damage such a web would be capable of wreaking on a snared craft would shoo away the most wizened combat veteran.

Deterrent? They obviously don't know what kind of thickheaded people they're dealing with today, he said in a deadpan voice.

Stevens laughed in response as Corsi scowled.

Duffy couldn't help but smirk a little himself. There was nothing like knowing your audience.

Corsi studied the screen for another moment before saying, "It's pretty obvious that we either fight or run. How do we fight it?"

Stevens reached for the keypad once again, the image on the screen responding to his commands. "I don't know how many ships we really need to disable in order to shut the web down. I recommend target-ing no less than three of them, but I'm hoping that getting two might be enough for us to slip through their fingers. That is, if Tholians have fingers."

On the viewer, the image's perspective jumped as the distance tightened between the Tholian cluster of ships and the da Vinci. Suddenly a line of white lanced from the Federation ships position, connecting to one of the red cones. Two more lines quickly followed it, each one homing in on a ship directly adjacent to the first target. As the animation played out, the Tholian ships broke from their hexagonal formation and swooped past the dot representing the da Vinci.

"Looks good in theory," Fabian, Duffy said as Corsi nodded her approval.

Stevens's expression was appreciative, yet he maintained his attitude of concern. "That's not to say, though, that the remaining ships can't just regroup and come back at us with a smaller web. He paused for the others to digest his assessment. "What we really need is another ship on our side."

"Yeah. Wouldn't that be nice," Duffy mused.

He had an idea of what to expect, should things not go in their favor, but he voiced the question nonetheless.

And when, uh, if were hit by the web?

Stevens entered the command to freeze the tactical animation on the viewer. Again, Duff, Im just guess-ing. It might smoke all of our systems, and that could just shut us down, or it might force us into a warp-core breach. Hell, that thing might cut through us like an exscalpel.

To Duffy, it was obvious from the silence that sud-denly descended upon the room that his two com-panions were envisioning their own worst-case sce-narios for the da Vincis entrapment. Before Duffy had much of a chance to mentally unspool his fate for himself, however, Stevens took a step toward the briefing rooms door.

As much as I hate to break up this party, Duff, I need just a couple of minutes to run the last check on my deflector equation.

Duffy nodded his head. Sure. Hey, Fabian, try not to blow us up before the Tholians get here. Theyll be upset if we take all the fun out of it for them.

Stevens just smiled and left the room, leaving Duffy with Corsi and the still-illuminated tactical display.

The security chief visibly stiffened in her seat, and Duffy knew that she was about to unload her true feelings about their current situation to him. He held up his hand to her, cutting her off just as she opened her mouth.

Okay, its not as bad as it sounds, he said.

Corsi didnt ease up. What is Stevens planning to do?

Fabian says hes thrown just about every combina-tion of stimuli he can channel through the deflector dish at the rift. Everything except a warp field. Duffy paused, noting the frown on Corsis face. I know youre not an engineer, and most times you could give two bloodworms about tech talk, but bear with me here. Fabian thinks that maybe the rift shows some of the same characteristics as a wormhole. Hes going to siphon off some plasma from the warp nacelles, mix it with some artificial veteron particles, and channel it all through the deflector dish. Its risky, but the upside is that the rift could flash open like a Bolian skyfire.

Corsi seemed unconvinced. And the downside?

Duffys gaze faltered, and he looked away before replying. We could blow out the deflector and short out the warp drive.

Commander, that is as bad as it sounds.

Despite her response, Corsis expression wasnt nearly as fierce as Duffy had anticipated it would be.

Of all the unexpected twists that this mission had thrown at him so far, one thing he never, ever would have bet on was that he'd find a supportive ally in Domenica Corsi. He had to admit that heading into battle against the Tholians didn't seem as fearsome a prospect with her at his side. Corsi had kept a level head when he himself had come close to losing all composure. In her eyes, Duffy saw the desire to believe in the plan, to try one last time to pull the Defiant, and more importantly their friends, from a fate even worse than death at the hands of the Tholians.

Nah, it's no big deal, Duffy lied. You'd understand it all with a little more training in warp theory. And you know, I could steer you toward some good texts on the subject if you need a little night reading. That would not be the way I'd choose to spend my nights, Mr. Duffy. Corsi cracked a hint of a smile as the ship's intercom sounded its hailing chime. In the moment before the chime was followed by a voice, Duffy chastised himself for wondering just how Corsi did spend her nights.

Duffy? I'm ready to go out here and times a wastin'. The two rose from the oval table without answering Stevens' invitation. As they moved to take their posts on the bridge, Duffy noticed himself crossing almost too naturally to the center seat. However, as he settled into the chair, he gripped its armrests a little too tight-

ly, feeling as though it was he who would be fired into the rift instead of the deflector's delicate intermix.

Boy, will I be glad when this is over.

Mr. Stevens, engage the deflector beam, he said, hoping that the trembling he thought he heard in his voice was strictly in his imagination. Duffy's eyes did not leave the main viewer as Stevens activated the deflector.

He saw no beam.

What he did see was a shower of sparks and fire erupting from the science console, and Stevens throwing himself away from the billowing smoke and hungry flames.

Fabian! Duffy shouted, leaping from his seat and bolting to where his friend had landed on the deck.

I'm all right, Stevens said, rolling onto his side and grimacing slightly from the abrupt impact.

Looking at Corsi, Duffy called out, Damage report!

The security officer's fingers were almost a blur as she fed commands to her console. I can't get any diagnostics from the deflector relay system. The dish is

either damaged or destroyed. Im routing a damage-control team there now. After another few seconds she looked up from her station. The warp drive is off-line. There was feedback from the deflector to the plasma conduits from the warp nacelles and it caused an overload. Engineering reports they may have to

shut down the warp core.

Everyone on the bridge knew what Corsis words really meant. With the Tholian ships only minutes away, the da Vinci was, for all intents and purposes, a sitting duck. There was no way they would be able to outrun the enemy vessels without warp drive.

Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT! Duffy launched him-self from where he had knelt next to Stevens and raced to the turbolifts doors. He was carried at first by instinct, but his sense of duty to the da Vincis crew kicked him into an even higher gear. As it was, he had to brake himself so as to avoid slamming bodily into Corsi, who had materialized between him and the tur-bolift with the efficiency of a transporter.

Where the hell are you going? she demanded, her eyes boring into Duffys.

I can have warp back on-line in three minutes, he said, moving to push past her. The turbolift doors hissed open at his approach, but he was halted by Corsis hand clamping down on his arm with the strength of a vice.

You cant leave this bridge, she said, her icy-calm voice belying the force she was exerting to keep him in place. The Tholians will be here any minute.

Duffy wrenched his arm free from Corsis grip and backpedaled into the waiting turbolift. As he stepped into the car, he met the gazes of the bridge crew and at that instant felt certain that he was doing the right

thing. Captain Scott had said it himself An engineers job was to keep his crew safe.

Well, that was a captains job as well, Duffy decided.

The da Vinci was hardly safe from the Tholians with-out the power to jump to warp speed, and no one knew those engines better than he did. Acting as cap-tain or engineer, Duffy knew there was only one place for him to be right now.

Three minutes! he said to Corsi, hoping the urgent volume in his voice would slow her down.

When it didnt, he finally resorted to the words that would stop her dead in her tracks.

Commander Corsi, you have the conn.

And stop she did.

With a grim smile on his lips, he called out Engineering! and the turbolifts doors slammed shut. He felt the customary lurch in the pit of his stomach as the car dropped him from the bridge into the bowels of the ship.

Sonya Gomez regarded the master systems display panel in the Defiants engineering section and marveled once again at the antiquated controls. Though the systems she was used to overseeing were vastly more advanced, she still perceived the echoes of function and purpose in the consoles around her. The admiration she felt for the engineers of this vessel and the bygone era it represented grew with every hour she spent here. More than once during this mission, she had imagined a younger Montgomery Scott, more than a century before he would come to lead the Starfleet Corps of Engineers, proudly riding herd on massive engines like the ones that had once powered the Defiant. The thought brought with it a momentary

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twinge of envy.

The rd century, Gomez decided, had to have been a more challenging time to be an engineer. With ships out of contact with command bases for weeks and sometimes months at a time, no SpaceDock facilities or starbases could be relied upon for repairs. Ships engineers were the ultimate masters of their vessels fates. The crews of ships like the Defiant had pushed back the frontiers of unknown space and expanded the storehouse of knowledge that she and many modern-day Starfleet officers took for granted.

The modifications to the generators are complete, Pattie reported, moving from the main engineering area to stand next to Gomez. They are tied into the warp drive, and I have programmed a new start-up sequence into the main computer.

Gomez nodded in satisfaction. Their preparations were finished, and with any luck they would all be back on the da Vinci within thirty minutes. She, for one, would be glad for that. Despite what she might feel for this ship and the rd century, she had grown weary of traipsing around the derelict ship in near darkness and chancing upon the scattered remains of the Defiants crew. She had also grown tired of being forced to listen to the echo of her own breathing inside her helmet. If she were granted one wish, she

decided it would be to never wear an environment suit again for the rest of her life.

Thanks, Pattie, she replied, turning to smile at her Nasat companion. Despite having what must surely be a splitting headache, thanks to her concussion, Pattie had plunged into preparing the generators for the unorthodox task they would shortly undertake. It hadn't been a simple proposition, either. Tying the modern-day components to the century-old power distribution systems had required even more finess-ing than Gomez had used to install the generators to begin with.

And assuming they succeeded in pushing the Defiant out of the rift, what was waiting for them on the other side? Was the da Vinci . . . was Kieran standing by to help them? To help her? What had happened after the Defiant had been forced back into interspace? Had Kieran made a stand and tried to protect the away team, or had he been forced to retreat? Had he managed to disable or destroy the Tholian ship, or . . . ?

Gomez couldn't bring herself to complete the thought. It was probably just as well, she decided. The coming minutes would require her complete attention. She couldn't afford distractions, especially now. The telltale sounds of a tricorder made her turn around to see Dr. Lense waving the device over Pattie's head.

Problem, Doctor? Gomez asked.

Lense shook her head. Just checking for signs that

Pattie might be starting to feel the effects of inter-phase. So far, she's fine. She smiled at the diminutive engineer. Must be that sturdy Nasat constitution. Too bad she can't share any of that, Gomez said with a grim smile of her own. Her mood turned serious again, however, when she asked, Elizabeth, how much longer do you think your supply of theragen will hold out?

I really don't know, the doctor replied. The inoculations are continuing to lose their potency and the effective period for each successive dose is decreasing rapidly. I'd give us another couple of hours before it loses its effectiveness altogether.

Gomez had no intention of being around when that happened. She had no desire to revisit the panic and sheer terror she'd experienced earlier in the Jefferies tube. So long as there remained options that would

let her fight to avoid it, she refused to consign herself to such a fate.

Well, Im ready to see about getting us out of here, she said as she activated her communicator.

\* \* \*

Gomez to Captain Gold. Were all set down here, sir. On the Defiants bridge, David Gold smiled in satisfaction to himself. As good as her word, Sonya Gomez and her team had completed their modifications well within the time remaining to them before their power supplies succumbed to the effects of interphase. They

would indeed get their one chance to push the Defiant from the rift.

Excellent work, Commander, he said. Stand by.

Stepping down into the bridges command well, the da Vinci captain moved to stand next to Soloman, who was seated at the ships helm. Putting a hand on the Bynars shoulder, Gold asked, Are we ready?

Soloman nodded. Thrusters are continuing to . . . function normally, Captain. They should provide sufficient power to . . . maneuver us out of the rift once . . . Commander Gomez triggers the warp pulse.

Fine, Gold replied. Of course, he couldnt stop from asking himself what they might expect to find on the other side of the rift. If they were successful, would they be greeted by the welcome sight of the da Vinci, or the ominous presence of a Tholian battle fleet?

As if hearing the unspoken thought, Gomez said, We might not be able to see whats waiting for us, Captain, but I might be able to give us a bit of insurance. I can divert power from our remaining generators to the shields and maybe one phaser bank. Wed have to sacrifice access to the main computer and life support to the bridge, though.

Gold needed no time to consider his options. Take whatever power you need, Sonya, but make sure we retain sensor control and the thrusters. As he spoke, he indicated for Soloman to don his helmet. Moments

later, both of them were once again ensconced in their environment suits.

Lets do this, Commander, Gold said. Throw the switch.

Aye, sir, Gomez replied. Brace yourselves up there. This might get a bit bumpy.

No sooner had Gold moved to the Defiants command chair than he was thrown bodily into it as the

mighty starship suddenly surged forward. There was only the briefest of rumblings from the deck plates as the ships massive warp engines received the single concentrated burst of power from the away teams portable generators.

In his minds eye, the da Vinci captain pictured the spike of energy instantaneously traveling the conduits that connected the generators to the ships warp drive, improvising an intermix reaction in the absence of dilithium. Gold didnt pretend to understand the mind-numbing complexity that enshrouded the concept of warp propulsion, but he was content in the knowledge that he commanded people who did. He knew he could best serve the specialists comprising the rest of the away team by staying out of their way and allowing them to do what they did best.

The main viewer registered the Defiants sudden explosive acceleration as crackling, multihued energy playing across the screen. It was felt in the ships hull as well, as deck plates and bulkheads groaned in

protest at the vessels abrupt movements.

Look at that, Gold said. The rift is reacting to the warp pulse.

Just as quickly as it had begun, the sounds of the ships struggling warp engines died out. Their effects on the peculiar interspatial pocket surrounding the Defiant were still being felt, however. The frenzied collision of energy continued on the main viewer, its intensity increasing as the ship hurtled closer to the edge of the rift.

Gold moved to the science station and activated the sensor controls. Its working, he said after consulting the viewfinder. The rift is beginning to open.

Hold us on course, Soloman, steady as she goes.

At the helm, Soloman said, Guiding the ship is . . . proving much easier than anticipated. It seems that . . . our theory about the rifts resistance was correct.

The relative quiet of the bridge was abruptly shattered as the engineering station erupted in a shower of sparks and flame. A deafening explosion echoed in the confines of the ships nerve center, throwing metal shrapnel and shards of plastic composites across the bridge. Both Soloman and Gold instinctively ducked, throwing their arms up and turning away from the explosion to protect their helmet faceplates. Gold felt the outside of his suit peppered by debris and prayed its rugged construction would withstand the bom-

bardment.



Soloman! Are you all right? Gold called out as another console near the front of the bridge blew apart, sending both officers scrambling for cover yet again.

Captain Gold! Gomez's voice called out over his communicator. We're getting massive feedback from the warp pulse. It's overloading our circuits.

Gold's reply was cut off as sparks burst from the helm, causing the lights and indicators on the panel to flicker wildly as the systems contained within the console fought to retain control.

Get away from there! he yelled to Soloman, but the Bynar needed no such prodding as he bolted from his seat and jumped out of the command well. An instant later the helm console was enveloped in a vicious ball of flame and exploding circuitry.

Sonya, we've lost helm control up here, Gold said into his communicator. We can't steer the ship.

Captain, Soloman called out, drawing the captain's attention. Look!

Gold turned in the indicated direction, and his mouth fell open. Beyond the bulkheads flanking the main viewer, the hull was losing its solidity and he could see stars and the roiling energy streams comprising the rift.

We're shifting out of interphase, he said. Without thinking, he looked to the deck at his feet and saw

that the plating had begun to lose its cohesion there as well. Wiring and conduits were already clearly visible.

It's getting too dangerous to stay here, he said.

Soloman nodded. Phase shifts will be occurring . . . throughout the ship, sir.

Gold moved to the turbolift, pulling his manual door opener from a suit pocket as he went. We can't do anything more from here, so we might as well move. Sonya, are you listening?

Yes, Captain, Gomez replied.

Forcing the turbolift doors apart with the opener revealed the darkened walls of the turboshaft.

Leaning in, Gold directed the lights of his helmet downward and they illuminated nothing except more of the vertical conduit. Only a pair of narrow maintenance ladders, one on both the front and rear walls of the shaft, interrupted its smooth texture.

Sonya, where's the auxiliary control center? he asked.

Gomez's response was immediate. Deck seven, sir.

I've already begun routing power to that location. All you have to do is get there. We can . . .

The rest of the engineers report was drowned out by the sounds of rushing air. Even muffled as it was through his helmet, Gold immediately recognized the source of the sound.

Decompression!

Spinning around, he saw that a section of bulkhead near the main viewer no bigger than a desktop LCARS terminal had disappeared entirely. The area was expanding rapidly and the sounds of escaping atmosphere were growing louder.

That's it, he shouted over the rush of departing air.

Time to go!

Grabbing Soloman by the arm, Gold pulled the Bynar close to him and hurled them both into the yawning darkness of the turboshaft.

\* \* \*

Sonya Gomez and P Blue worked feverishly at the master systems console in main engineering, trying to divert power from damaged or unresponsive areas of the ship to those that could still be useful. Alarm indicators illuminated across the board, bearing mute testimony to the severity of the situation.

Bridge systems have gone totally inoperative, Pattie reported as she consulted one display. I am seeing power fluctuations in the remaining generators.

Cut the feed, Gomez ordered. Stand by to route whatever's left to deck seven, section -Alpha. With three of the away teams five generators committed to the ship's warp engines, the remaining units were being tasked with providing power for the other systems Gomez had determined were necessary to control the ship and complete their mission. Now more

than ever, the vessel's design was working against her. Though well-constructed and possessing a performance record nearly unmatched in the annals of Starfleet history, Constitution-class starships had never been intended to rely on small, localized power distribution schemes. The huge power plants normally used to drive the ship and its multitude of onboard systems were, of course, unavailable to her, so she would simply have to make do with what she had. Sonya, Elizabeth Lense called out from the other end of the bank of consoles, I'm reading a massive feedback in the other generators.

It had been a gamble, Gomez knew, tying the generators directly into the warp drive. Forcing the momentary burst of energy required to jump-start the

ships mighty engines was definitely not something the power units were designed to do.

A massive explosion rocked the engineering room, slamming Gomez and the others into consoles and bulkheads. The concussion wave was still washing over them when two more blasts erupted in the chamber, sending flame and shrapnel in all directions.

Gomez could hear it burrowing into the walls and the control panels around them, but they were partially protected from the explosions by a wall separating the master console from the rest of the engineering area.

Is everybody all right? she called out as she

regained her feet. No one reported any injuries as Gomez tentatively stepped around the wall and peered into the main engineering area. A scene of utter destruction greeted her.

The overloaded generators ultimately had succumbed to the tremendous energy impulses forced back into them from the Defiants warp engines, unleashing a sizable portion of their considerable power into the room. The resulting explosions had decimated the chamber, destroying consoles, power distribution nodes, even hurling debris into the ships impulse engines. Gomez doubted that more damage could have been inflicted had the room been subjected to the detonation of a photon torpedo. It was sad-denying to see the once-vibrant heart of the starship reduced to near ruin.

At the master console, Pattie had already shaken off the effects of the explosions and had returned to work. Power has been rerouted to auxiliary control, Commander.

Gomez acknowledged the report, knowing that the two remaining generators were the only things preventing the Defiant from reverting to the lifeless hulk they had originally discovered. Already burdened with the requirements of supplying power to essential systems, the surviving units might also be needed to deal with whatever awaited them on the other side of the rift.

As if sensing her troubled thoughts, Lense said, Youve done all you can, Sonya. Its up to the captain and Soloman now.

The sentiment, well-intentioned as it was, did little to ease Gomez's mounting frustration. What she really heard was There is absolutely nothing more you can

do about it.

Okay, so its taking more than three minutes.

A bead of perspiration rolled into Duffys right eye as he lay on his back, his head once again shoved through a bulkhead opening and into the mesmerizing glow of the da Vincis warp-drive control system.

He squinted and blinked the sweat from his eye, trying to refocus his sight on rerouting circuitry paths.

When he first stormed into main engineering and tore open an access panel seemingly at random, other engineers looked at Duffy as if the space madness had finally caught up with the young commanding officer.

He now chuckled to himself as he thumbed the controls of his handheld nanopulse laser and sealed the last of the shorted connections. Even a seasoned engi-

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neer might have needed precious minutes simply to track down the problems keeping the da Vincis warp engines from functioning. But Duffy had suspected just where to start looking in the system for effects from the deflector dish feedback loop, and his instincts had been correct.

He squirmed his way out of the bulkhead and pushed himself to his feet. Pointing to one of the engineers standing nearby, he called out, Conlon! Finish up here! The ensign rushed to work as Duffy sped out of engineering, calling over his shoulder, And let me know the instant its ready!

Though his work in engineering wasnt complete, Duffy knew he had to be elsewhere. Never in his life had he wanted to be on the bridge of a starship as badly as he wanted to be now, he realized as he sprinted down the corridor. His momentum nearly carried him into the nearby turbolifts doors before they could whisk open with their signature pneumatic hiss.

Bridge!

Come on, come ON!

The car began to move and he stared at the ceiling, as though he could urge the turbolift to travel faster through sheer force of will. After a handful of seconds that seemed to last an eternity, the doors finally parted and he didnt so much step onto the bridge as he hurled himself onto it. Panting, he looked at the main

viewscreen, ready for anything.

Nothing was there but black, empty space.

His breathing slowed somewhat as he whirled to face Corsi, who stood almost where he had left her just . . .

Six minutes, thirty-seven seconds, said the security officer after a glance at her console. Welcome back, Commander.

He gasped at her, trying to regain his composure. We still dont have warp, but we will. He moved to the center seat and plopped himself into it. Fabian, keep working. Im playing a hunch that well have time for one more shot at this.

McAllan spoke up from his tactical station.

Commander, the Tholians are approaching. Theyre in viewing and communications range.

The final grains of sand were falling through the hourglass, and the crew of the da Vinci was out of options. Duffy wanted to get a real look at the threat that had hung in his minds eye for what seemed like forever.

Put them on screen.

The dark of space vanished in a flash as an amber glow radiated from the main viewer. There it was A deadly hexagon of Tholian ships linked by the powerful energy web, burning with what seemed to be a life of its own. The formation did not waver from its course as it bore down on the da Vinci.

Duffy didnt blink. He stared at the viewer, refusing to let the web scare him from saving his crew.

His crew.

Hail them, he ordered. And get ready for a fight.

\* \* \*

The Defiants auxiliary control center was a room pulsing with life, energy, and purpose as its doors parted to admit David Gold and Soloman.

Bless you, Sonya, the da Vinci captain said as the pair moved to the rooms central control console. A quick glance of the display readouts there showed that they would be able to control all available systems from this point.

Thats good, Gold thought, because were running out of places to go.

The journey from the bridge had been an interesting one, with Gold and Soloman using their suits small maneuvering thrusters to control their descent into the turboshaft. By comparison, forcing the doors to deck seven had been easy, after which Solomans tricorder had guided them here.

Intended for use only in the event of the main bridge being destroyed or otherwise compromised,

this room harbored none of the aesthetic niceties that so characterized the ships primary nerve center. It was designed solely with function in mind, and at that moment such efficiency suited David Gold just fine. Activate the viewscreen, he said. Soloman found

the necessary controls and seconds later the screen on the far bulkhead flickered to life, its blank slate replaced with the now-familiar chaos that was the rift. But it wasnt all that was visible.

Stars, Gold whispered. Indeed, the fabric of space, with its millions of stars, was growing more distinct with each passing second. The bold plan put into motion by Gomez and her team had worked, and the Defiant was emerging from the rift.

Captain, Soloman said, sensors are detecting the da Vinci. She is holding station . . . just within trans-porter range. Continuing to consult the limited information provided by the ships scanners, the Bynar added, I am also reading six Tholian vessels . . . on an approach vector.

Looking at the displays himself, Gold pointed to one that displayed a large, undefined energy reading. Whats that?

It is similar in configuration to . . . the energy webs normally created by . . . Tholian vessels, Soloman replied. Though it is not a deployment . . . I am familiar with.

Theyre pulling it like a big fishing net, Gold said, experience and instinct giving him the answer. They mean to snare the da Vinci with it.

Soloman nodded. It is of sufficient strength to . . . overcome the da Vincis shields.

Stand by on the thrusters, Gold said before tap-

ping his communicator. Gold to Gomez. Sonya, I need whatever power you have left for the deflector shields, and that phaser bank if you have it.

The engineers reply was most definitely lacking in enthusiasm. I was really hoping you wouldnt say that, Captain. This ship cant go into combat.

Gold was well aware of what he had at his disposal. One hundred years ago, this vessel was the match of just about anything the Federations known enemies could throw at her. Now, however, she was a shell of what she had once been, barely able to move at a limp and with no real weaponry. Realistically, the Defiant stood no chance of withstanding any sort of pro-longed battle.

But that wasnt what he was after. He knew his team

of engineers wouldn't understand immediately, but that was only natural. After all, he was out of his element in the midst of most engineering problems. But now they were on his turf, playing a game he had more experience at than he liked to readily admit. I know, Sonya, but hopefully we won't have to. I just need the old girl to come through one more time.

As he studied the bank of tactical displays dominating the forward bulkhead of his ship's command center, Nostrene could not help but be amused at the readings they conveyed. Scans showed that the Federation ship was still maintaining station near the last known position of the derelict vessel that had led Starfleet into Tholian space. It now hung broadside and vulnerable to the energy net.

The human in command of the rescue ship had to know that any attack against a Tholian ship would not go unanswered. Further, if he had paid any attention to the intelligence briefings Starfleet had surely provided regarding the Assembly, the human would also know that when attacked, Tholian vessels always

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retaliated without mercy. Any competent commander would almost certainly realize that a single ship stood no chance of survival when faced with such a situation.

The prudent course of action would be to flee rather than risk capture or destruction.

And yet, the Federation ship remained.

Are they damaged? Nostrene asked.

Overseeing the subordinates at the sensor and weapons stations, Taghrex replied, Not severely, Commander. Their hyperlight drive appears nonfunctional, but they have full use of weapons and defensive systems.

Can they outrun us at sublight speeds?

The second-in-command turned to study the sensor displays once more before replying. For a time, but ultimately we can overtake them, and then the energy net will do the rest.

Nostrene nodded at the report. Even though their six ships could deploy only weakened defensive shields while generating the energy net, he was not concerned. Once ensnared in its confines, the force of the mesh would quickly deplete the power reserves of the enemy ship and leave it helpless against Tholian weapons. The Starfleet crew would be at the mercy of

their captors within moments.

Taking another look at the scanner readings for himself, Nostrene shook his head and tried to understand the thought processes of the Federation ships

commander. Even without hyperlight capability, the human surely must know that being a moving target was more desirable than being a stationary one.

Nostrene decided that he must either be a reckless maverick or a nave fool.

We will attack and disable them, he said. The Magistrates want prisoners, but if necessary we will destroy them. Taking captives from enemy vessels was not standard procedure, nor was it something Nostrene himself preferred to be involved with.

Prisoners were troublesome, even discounting such things as providing sustenance and environmental conditions when other races were involved. He would rather just destroy the Federation vessel and be done with it, but he knew there were larger concerns here. The Starfleet crew undoubtedly would have contacted their parent command about their current situation. There was also the possibility that they had passed on information regarding the web generator that the salvage team had discovered aboard the derelict. Though it was doubtful that the crew of the recovery ship had learned the true nature of their find, Nostrene had to proceed as if that were the case. There was also the matter of obtaining or destroying the web generator itself. Once he had taken prisoners from the rescue ship, Nostrene merely needed to wait until the vessel trapped in the interdimensional pocket reappeared. If, at that time the genera-

tor could not be retrieved via transporter, then he would simply order the entire ship destroyed, along with any Starfleet personnel still aboard it.

Commander, called out the subordinate manning the communications station, the Starfleet ship is hailing us. Its commander wishes to speak with you.

Nostrene waved the report away. No response. I am not interested in anything a human would have to say.

We are entering weapons range, Taghrex called out. After a moment he added, The Federation ship has energized its defense shields and weapons.

Studying the central tactical display before him, Nostrene noted the Starfleet ships movement, orienting itself to face the incoming attack.

Apparently, the human commander is going to make



a fight of it.

Nostrene was pleased at that thought. He had heard of the tenacity displayed by Starfleet in combat situations and had seen reports of their actions during the Dominion War. Those who fought aboard Federation ships showed remarkable resolve, even in the face of certain defeat. It was a trait Nostrene could admire even in nonTholians. He knew that the brief skirmish he had experienced earlier with the Starfleet recovery vessel had not been a true test of its crews mettle, so it was with great anticipation that he greeted the coming battle.

The subordinate overseeing the tactical scanners suddenly turned from his station. Commander, I am detecting a fluctuation in background radiation readings. The interspatial pocket is opening. How is that possible? Nostrene demanded. According to the readings obtained by his science advisor, the rift was not expected to reopen for some time yet. Put it on screen.

The image on the command decks main viewer shifted in time for Nostrene and everyone else to see the mysterious black void appear once more, a gaping hole in the fabric of space. Seconds later, part of the rift was itself blocked out as a blue-green shape erupted from its center.

The other ship, Taghrex exclaimed. It has returned. Turning to Nostrene, he said, Should we alter our attack course? It would be powerless to defend itself against us.

Indeed, Nostrene thought. Even as it emerged from the rift and shed the multihued cocoon of energy enshrouding it, the Defiant appeared to be nothing more than a powerless hulk. Its warp nacelles were dark, as were the numerous portholes that pock-marked its surface. It was inconceivable for it to be capable of mounting any kind of defense.

Negative, he decided. It poses no threat. We will dispatch the other vessel first. The derelict will still be there when that task is complete. Turning back to the

row of tactical scanners, he said, Target the rescue ships weapons banks. Stand by to attack. That was when the derelict opened fire.

Alarms wailed on the bridge of the da Vinci as an electric-blue phaser blast sliced through the

viewscreens image of the Tholian attack formation and connected with the ship anchoring the lower-left corner of the pulsating, hexagonal web.

Kieran Duffy watched in awe as the stricken enemy ship reeled from the blow of raw energy and wavered in its flight. He couldn't believe his eyes as he found himself in his second battle at the helm of the da Vinci.

But I know damn well I didn't give any order to fire. Who the hell is shooting? Duffy shouted as he saw the web flicker in intensity. It quickly resolidified as the five remaining ships moved into a pentagon of

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offensive power, leaving the injured craft to drift away from the group.

Stevens's answer was awash with excitement. Duffy! She's back! The Defiants back!

The news shocked Duffy, then the thrill of it immediately infused his body. The center seat felt electrified to the young commander as he spat order after order to the bridge crew.

McAllan! Fire a spread on your predetermined targets! Helm, angle us toward the rift! And put the Defiant on the viewer, for God's sake!

As Duffy tried to regain his perspective of the battle with its new participant, the viewscreens angle now assisted him with a view of the newly configured Tholian force and the glowing U.S.S. Defiant. The century-old starship was moving through the doorway of its interspatial cage under what appeared to be its own power. Duffy gasped as the ship's secondary hull and finally its twin nacelles cleared the rending of space just in time to be called back to active duty with a vengeance. He squirmed in his seat as he felt the tide of the battle turning more in their favor.

Oh, Sonnie! You and your timing!

\* \* \*

Direct hit! Gold called out from the sensor console in the Defiant's auxiliary control center. Nice shooting, Soloman. Peering into the viewfinder mounted against the room's rear bulkhead, the da

Vinci captain could see that, although the antiquated ship had managed to produce a mere half-strength phaser blast, it had proven enough to pierce the defensive screens of the Tholian vessel.

After studying the Tholians' odd formation, Gold played a hunch that spoiling the trajectory of one or

more of the ships might have the effect of disrupting the energy net generated by the group. Watching the sensor readings on the net flicker and readjust as it compensated for the spoiled flight path of the ship the Defiant had just fired on, he was pleased to see his instincts proven right.

The damaged ship is . . . breaking formation, Captain, Soloman reported from the auxiliary helm controls. The remaining vessels are . . . maintaining their attack vector toward the da Vinci.

His eyes not moving from the viewfinder, Gold said, Then well have to do it again. Target another of the ships and stand by to fire.

Engineering to Captain Gold, Gomezs voice filtered through his communicator. Sir, I need a moment to reroute power. The generators overloading, and I cant feed power to the phasers without sacrificing something else.

Route power from the shields, Sonya, Gold said without hesitation. Take whatever you need for the phasers, then put everything you have left into the forward screens.

Captain, Soloman said as he turned from the helm, with only thrusters to . . . maneuver the ship, we will be at a distinct . . . tactical disadvantage. Shrugging as if he was used to taking a vastly out-classed ship into combat on a daily basis, Gold replied, If the Tholians finish the da Vinci off, our defenses wont matter.

During a career of nearly fifty years, Gold had served aboard and even commanded some of the most advanced vessels the Federation had to offer. It therefore seemed ironic to him that his last assignment would be going into combat aboard a dilapidated, hundred-year-old starship that had spent its entire lifetime confined to the pages of history.

Lifting his face from the viewfinder, Gold took an extra second to look around the auxiliary control room, taking in its archaic design and yet once again admiring how vibrant and full of life it seemed to be. After so many years locked away from the rest of the universe, all but forgotten, the Defiant had emerged proudly from its prison. Even though it limped and struggled to overcome its decades of captivity, the once-mighty starship would still head valiantly toward its one final mission.

Only in Starfleet, he decided. I guess weird really is part of the job.

\* \* \*

Come on, people! We're not going to let Captain

Gold take the lead here! Duffy pitched forward in his seat as a thought struck him.

The Tholians are going to turn on the Defiant!

The irony of being so close to saving the away team, only to see them die as the Tholian web savaged the woefully outmatched vessel ripped at Duffy's brain.

Time narrowed for the commander as he tapped into every resource of strategy he could recall every old Starfleet Academy course, every holographic simulation, every past conversation with Gold or anybody who ever steered a starship into battle.

Keep after those targets! We have to kill the power to that web! Duffy studied the Tholian formation and it became clear that the enemy ships had no intention of engaging the practically defenseless Defiant. They were bearing down on the da Vinci, and this moment was their last to act.

And suddenly, he knew what to do.

Helm, full power to aft-Z axis thrusters, now!

To her credit, the ensign manning the helm didn't hesitate in the face of the unusual order. Instead, she quickly fed the string of commands into her console, and the da Vinci responded with comparable speed. Though the ship's inertial dampeners protected the crew from feeling its effects, the result of Duffy's order was evident on the main viewer. The stars on the screen spiraled dizzily as the da Vinci's thrusters fired, pushing the ship on a perpendicular

trajectory from the direction it had been facing.

Bring us about, helm, Duffy called out. Port thrusters only.

The ensign responded, and Duffy imagined he could feel the ship rotating as it pivoted on its axis.

On the viewscreen, he saw the Tholian battle group hurtling past the point where the da Vinci had been an instant before. Then the image shifted as the ship reoriented itself, and instead of sitting in the path of the menacing energy net, Duffy now had his best shot at the Tholian ships as they overshot their mark.

Fire!

Phasers blasted from the da Vinci, catching a Tholian ship square in its propulsion unit. A second ship took a fresh blast from the Defiant, and the energy web sparked once before fading entirely from view.

That's it, Duff, Stevens called out from the science station. The formation is scattering and the web has

deteriorated completely. It looks like the Tholians are retreating.

Duffy rose from the command chair, his expression one of unmasked pride. They had done it! Looks like its all over except for the bragging. Nice work, people. Open a channel to the Defiant, and lets see about- Commander, McAllan said, one of the Tholian ships has lost all power. Its heading directly for the rift. Turning his attention back to the viewer, Duffy saw the lone enemy vessel spinning without control

toward the dark area and the chaotic area of space behind it.

Helm, intercept course, he ordered. Mr. McAllan, ready the tractor beam. Lock onto that ship.

At her station, Corsi made no effort to disguise the shock in her voice. Commander?

His attention focused on the viewscreen, Duffy ignored her as the tractor beam enveloped the Tholian ship, instantly stopping its tumbling descent into the rift.

Got her, Commander, McAllan reported.

Pull them out of there, McAllan, nice and slow.

Looking over at Corsi, Duffy added, And lets hope somebodys paying attention.

Corsi nodded in agreement, the corners of her mouth turning upward as she realized what Duffy was after. No matter what action the Tholians might take against the two Federation ships, it didnt justify consigning the disabled Tholian ship to the unpleasant fate awaiting them in the depths of interphase.

McAllan looked up from his tactical console. Were clear of the rift, sir. We can release her without danger. Shaking his head, Duffy instead asked, Whats the status of the other Tholian ships?

The undamaged ships are moving to assist the others, McAllan replied. They have broken off their attack.

Well, then lets extend an olive branch, Duffy said.

Angle the tractor beam to send that ship in their direction. Helm, lay in a course that will back us away from the Tholians and toward the Defiant. Taking one last look at the viewscreen, he added, And Mr. McAllan, deactivate all weapons.

What? The single word exploded from Corsis mouth, but she must have realized her grievous lapse in protocol because she drew a deep breath before continuing. Commander, that may not be our best

course of action right now.

Duffy nodded. I understand your concerns, but somebody has to take a chance here. On the viewer, he watched as the Tholian ship they had rescued, still guided by the da Vincis tractor beam, moved toward its companion vessels. After a moment the beam faded, leaving the damaged ship to move forward under its own momentum.

One of the other ships is moving toward it, Commander, McAllan said. No sign of a regroup for another attack.

At the communications console, Abramowitz turned in her seat. Mr. Duffy, we are being hailed by Commander Nostrene.

Still wary that the Tholian ships might attempt to resume their offensive, Duffy nevertheless knew that he was obligated to pursue a peaceful resolution here. Hed already initiated such an attempt by rescuing the

drifting Tholian ship. He wondered now what that action had purchased for them.

On screen, Carol. Lets see what the commander has to say.

The now-familiar image of the Tholian leader appeared on the viewer, the reddish hue of his crys-talline body dominating the roiling spectrum of color that filled the picture.

Federation vessel, Nostrene said, your presence in Tholian space is no longer welcome. Retrieve the derelict you came for and depart our territory immediately. This concludes our cooperative effort. With that, the image faded and was replaced by the starfield once more.

Stevens was the first to react. That has to be one of the most heart-wrenching apologies ever offered by a Tholian.

Any bets on how much that hurt him to say? Corsi asked. Turning her attention to Duffy, she said, Well, done, Commander.

Duffys first impulse was to respond with one of his usual flippant comments, but he checked himself. Domenica Corsi didnt hand out compliments lightly, and coming from her, the simple statement was high praise indeed. He decided not to undercut the moment and instead accept her words in the spirit he was sure they were intended.

Indicating McAllan with a nod of his head, he said,

Keep your eyes on the Tholians until were out of

range. In the meantime, contact the Defiant. I think its high time we got the hell out of here. He paused, then added, Oh, and someone ask Captain Gold which big chair he wants to sit in for the ride home.

Normally a hive of activity, as it had been since first entering service more than a century ago, operations aboard the primary SpaceDock facility orbiting Earth had come to a virtual standstill. Observation galleries overlooking the stations interior docking areas were crammed to overflowing with spectators, and every available viewscreen had been tied into the bays visual feeds. A similar image was also being transmitted on subspace frequencies throughout the Federation, offering a view of history to anyone who might be interested.

And Admiral William Ross couldnt imagine anyone not being interested.

For years it had been a common complaint among

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the older, more seasoned members of Starfleet that respect for tradition and history seemed to be waning among younger officers and enlisted personnel. The explorers and defenders of peace from those bygone eras had supposedly exhausted all that they could offer to those who now wore the uniform. It had been said that many outside Starfleet had also outgrown the need to honor and appreciate those who had forged trails through the cosmos in the Federations early days.

However, looking down at the throng of people gathered in SpaceDocks main observers gallery, Ross smiled in satisfaction at the fervor he saw. He could almost feel the energy washing over the room in the anticipation of the next few moments. Maybe the arrival of the Defiant would engender only momentary fascination among the masses before they all returned to their regular lives, he decided. Then again, perhaps respect and interest in the past would be reclaimed here today, if indeed it had been lost at all.

Mighty flashy party weve got here today, wouldnt you say, Admiral?

The voice was gravelly and weathered, much like its owner, Ross discovered as he turned to face the speaker. His expression brightened at the new arrival, nodding with enthusiasm of his own. On a day that would play host to legends, it seemed only fitting that he be

visited by one of their living representatives.

At nearly one hundred fifty years of age, Admiral Leonard McCoy still presented an imposing figure, though his shoulders slumped and his skin was little more than a waxy film covering the bones and muscles of his withered body. None of that seemed to matter, however, as Ross could still see the fiery determination in the admirals eyes that had been captured countless times in biographical databases and historical narratives. The former chief medical officer of the original U.S.S. Enterprise represented the same history as the ship approaching SpaceDock, and Ross felt it more than appropriate that he should be here on this day.

Admiral, Ross said, extending his hand to the aged McCoy, its good to see you. Couldnt resist coming out to see the Defiants homecoming?

Taking Rosss proffered hand in his own frail grasp, McCoy nodded in greeting. Wouldnt have missed it for anything. Not a whole lot excites me anymore, you know, but this is somethin special. Ill bet Scotty is champin at the bit to get into the Defiants engine room. Hell be like a newborn Horta in a rock quarry once he starts diggin around in there.

Ross smiled at the thought of Captain Scott contentedly pulling himself through the depths of the antiquated starship. Well, Id imagine youre anxious to take a tour yourself, arent you?

His face taking on a somber expression, McCoy replied, Maybe after all the work is done. He nodded in the direction of open space beyond the plexi-steel viewing port. Ive volunteered to lead the forensic detail going aboard the Defiant. Itll take several weeks to identify all of the crewmembers, based on what Ive read of Captain Golds report. Its a sad duty, but one I couldnt in all good conscience leave to someone else. Ross saw McCoy's eyes begin to water as the admiral cast a glance downward before continuing. Ive always felt a bit guilty that I was able to figure out how to counteract the effects of that interspatial nonsense where the Defiants doctor couldnt. Maybe if shed had more time, she wouldve come up with something like the theragen cure eventually. We were lucky we only had to deal with the effects of that space from outside the rift, but they were stuck right in the middle of it. They never really had a chance. He paused for a moment before returning his attention



to Ross. The least we can do now is make sure the crew gets to their final rest as best we can. Ross nodded quietly in agreement before the SpaceDock intercom system attracted their attention, along with that of everyone in the observers gallery and, in all likelihood, the rest of the station. Attention, all personnel Incoming starship on approach vector. Stand by for docking.

\* \* \*

Ye've done a fine job, Captain. My compliments to your crew.

In his ready room aboard the da Vinci, David Gold absorbed the praise from Captain Montgomery Scott, noting a glint of satisfaction in the legendary engi-neers eyes that he hadnt seen in quite a while. Like himself, Scott had only barely been able to contain his enthusiasm at the idea of stepping aboard the Defiant to revel in the history it represented. Of course, Gold knew that his friends desire to examine the fabled starship was more personal, more deeply ingrained from life experience than he himself would ever know.

All the credit goes to Commander Gomez and her team, Gold said. In addition to her figuring out a way to get the Defiant out of the rift, Commander Duffy played a large part in straightening out the rest of the mess we managed to get ourselves into.

Ah, Commander Gomez, Scott replied. Yes, I've read her report, and I mean to have a conversation with the lass once shes finished aboard the Defiant. Of all the areas of that ship to blow to hell, did it have to be engineering? I was so lookin forward to gettin in there and pokin around. Gold could see that Scott was joking, naturally, though he couldnt help but wonder how much truth lay behind the playful words. As for Mr. Duffy, the S.C.E. commander contin-ued, I must tell ye, Captain, I know somethin about

bein thrust into a command situation when ye dont feel qualified to do the job. Your Mr. Duffy comport-ed himself remarkably well for a lad whos not lookin for a command of his own. His quick thinkin to save that Tholian ship went a long way toward avoidin severe damage to our relations with the Assembly. The bloody politicians are still foamin at the mouth over the whole thing, but I suspect theyll eventually get over it.

Gold couldnt resist a small chuckle at that. Well,

they need something to keep them busy. On that note, though, what's the word on bringing the Tholians and the Klingons to the negotiating table?

Shrugging his shoulders, Scott replied, "There's no telling what those popinjay diplomats are planning. You'd think that with the information your team discovered aboard the Defiant that the Diplomatic Corps would want to get everyone into negotiations now, while the situation can be contained. From what I hear, that's exactly what Ambassador Worf is pushing for."

Gold nodded in agreement. Revealing the secret of the web generator and its use on the Traelus II colony to the Klingons would have to be handled with utmost delicacy if any good were to come from it. While the Federation could not continue to allow negative feelings to dominate their relations with the Tholians, they could ill afford to lose the valuable

alliance they had cultivated with the Klingon Empire after decades of tension and mistrust. He hoped that Worf, the Federation ambassador to Qonos, could pull it off.

Perhaps something positive can come from all of this, Gold mused. If the Federation can get the Tholians and Klingons past a very dark chapter in their history, and if we gain new allies in the bargain, then the sacrifice made by the Defiant's crew won't have been for nothing. Not many people could claim that their actions would have such far-reaching ramifications more than a century after their deaths, after all. Gold mentally saluted Captain Thomas Blair and the men and women who had served under him.

The whistle of the da Vinci's intraship communications system and the voice of Domenica Corsi interrupted their conversation.

Bridge to Captain Gold. Sir, the Defiant is approaching SpaceDock.

Thank you, Commander, Gold replied as he rose from behind his desk. He indicated the door to Scott. Well, Captain, shall we play witness to one more bit of history?

\* \* \*

With her main power plants restored to partial operation, the Defiant no longer resembled a ship of the dead. Instead, the majority of her portholes were brilliantly illuminated, and her running lights shone

brightly against the scarred and pitted surface of her

tritanium hull. Her warp nacelles remained inactive, though, the Bussard ramscoops still dark rather than the vibrant crimson they had once pulsed. Except for that detail, the Defiant looked as though she might be an active ship of the line.

Space traffic controllers throughout the solar system had found themselves burdened with the demands of tracking thousands of Starfleet and civilian spacecraft converging on Earth, their crews all clamoring to see the return of the legendary starship.

A swarm of smaller vessels shadowed the course being followed by the Defiant, many carrying journalists from worlds spanning the Federation and all working diligently for impressive visual images of the ship to transmit to their home planets.

Sitting in the command chair on the bridge of the Defiant, Sonya Gomez could not shake completely the temptation to be overwhelmed by what she was seeing. At first the crowd of vessels bearing curious spectators and well-wishers had unnerved her, but that had quickly faded. Now she allowed herself to give in to the enormity of the moment. After all, how often did something like this happen?

With partial power restored throughout the ship, the da Vincis crew had spent the past several days carefully transferring the bodies of Defiant personnel into portable stasis containers, where they would

remain until Starfleet forensic teams completed the arduous task of identifying each crewmember.

Automatic atmosphere scrubbers had removed the worst of the dust and pulverized remains of the Defiant's crew, though Gomez doubted she would ever forget the dank smell that had greeted her the first time she had removed her suit helmet.

She had suggested that Captain Gold guide the Defiant into SpaceDock, but he had declined the honor, deferring it to her instead.

It was your team that got her out of that hellhole, Sonya, he had said. It's only fitting that you finish the job you started.

Gomez was grateful he had made the offer. With its brightly lit consoles and assortment of background noises, she could easily lose herself in the ambiance of the bridge and believe that she was serving on a ship of the line in the 23rd century.

It really is something else, isn't it? Duffy said from where he sat at the communications console. More da Vinci crewmembers manned other bridge stations as well, providing Gomez with navigational, sensor, and

engineering information. Below decks, other engineers were nursemaiding the Defiant's engines on their final cruise.

Though the ship had been towed by the *da Vinci* back from Tholian space to the edge of the Terran system, Gomez had requested that the Defiant travel the

last leg of its journey under its own power. She and Duffy, along with Pattie and several other S.C.E. specialists, had toiled for two days to ensure the ship's ability to make the trip. Seeing the response from onlookers as they traversed the solar system, Gomez was glad she had pushed the idea.

It's something, all right, she replied. And it should be. The men and women who served on this ship deserve nothing less. Turning the command chair to face Duffy, she said, I haven't had the chance to say this before now, Kieran, but I wanted to thank you for all you did. We couldn't have completed the mission by ourselves.

Duffy attempted to wave the praise away. Thank Fabian, or even Corsi for that matter. They had as much to do with it as anyone. His features took on an odd quality, one that Gomez couldn't remember seeing before as he added, They helped get me through the tough spots.

At the helm where he was trying, without success, not to enjoy this occasion too much, Fabian Stevens turned in his seat. Don't listen to him, Commander.

Oh Duffy, there is on the verge of becoming a real lead-from-the-front kind of guy. Captain Gold might have to watch out for his job. With a mischievous smile he added, Or maybe you should.

Gomez laughed, happy that her friend had performed so well under such trying circumstances.

More than instilling added confidence in his shipmates, as well as Captain Gold and even herself, she knew that the experience would do much toward allowing Kieran to eventually realize his ultimate potential.

Still, she couldn't let Stevens's crack go uncontested. Her response was cut off, however, by a hail whistle from the communications console, followed by a female voice full of enthusiasm.

U.S.S. Defiant, this is SpaceDock Approach Control. Stand by for docking maneuver.

It was a straightforward message, Gomez knew, conveying nothing behind the magnitude of the occasion.

But she also knew that the time for reflection would come later. For now, there were the simple yet necessary obligations to tend to.

Nodding to Stevens, Gomez waited until he entered the necessary commands to transfer the ships maneuvering control to SpaceDock, then reported, Approach Control, this is Defiant. We have transferred guidance to you. Shes all yours.

Affirmative, Defiant. SpaceDock confirms control. Welcome home.

Her duties aboard the legendary ship finally at an end, Gomez replied, Defiant confirms. Thank you, SpaceDock.

\* \* \*

Under the guidance of automated maneuvering sys-

tems, the resurrected starship aligned itself with SpaceDocks main entryway. With thousands of spectators looking on in the stations observation areas and billions more watching over subspace video feeds, the ship quietly entered the orbital facility, sinking into the welcoming embrace that it hadn't known for far too long.

After more than a century, the U.S.S. Defiant had finally come home.

Dayton Ward has been a fan of Star Trek since conception (his, not the shows). After serving for eleven years in the U.S. Marine Corps, he discovered the private sector and the piles of cash to be made there as a software engineer. His start in professional writing came as a result of placing stories in each of the first three Star Trek Strange New Worlds anthologies. In addition to co-writing the two Interphase books for the Star Trek S.C.E. series with Kevin Dilmore, Dayton is also the author of the forthcoming Star Trek Original Series novel, In the Name of Honor, to be published in . Though he currently lives in Kansas City with his wife, Michi, he is a Florida native and still maintains a torrid long-distance romance with his beloved Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

\* \* \*

Kevin Dilmore counts himself as very thankful for the person who, at age , tipped him off to the fact that Star Trek was a live-action television show before it was a Saturday morning cartoon. A graduate of the University of Kansas, he works as news editor and

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

cops-and-courts reporter for a twice-weekly news-paper

in Paola, Kansas, where he lives with his wife, Linda, and two children. While this is his first foray into Star Trek fiction, Kevin has covered nonfiction angles of the world of Star Trek for several years as a contributing writer for Star Trek Communicator magazine, as well as the Internet site StarTrek.com. He will always take pride in the knowledge that the formula for transparent aluminum was devised by the user of a Macintosh computer.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS