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WILDFIRE
Book One of Two

David Mack



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New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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ISBN: 0-7434-5678-5

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Chapter

1

Captain Lian T'su tightened her grip on the armrests of her seat. The Orion main viewer showed another huge web of lightning bolts tear through the roiling, red-orange clouds of the gas giant's atmosphere. The electrical discharges rendered the clouds visible for little more than a second and were followed immediately by a bone-rattling boom of thunder that reverberated through the decks of the Steamrunner-class starship.

"Do you have a lock on that signal yet?" T'su said to her tactical officer, raising her voice slightly to be heard over the din of the ship's groaning outer bulkheads.

"Negative, Captain," said Lieutenant Ryan. "Atmospheric interference is still too heavy. Switching to a delta-channel isolation frequency."

The hull of the Orion had begun shrieking in protest soon after they had descended ten thousand kilometers into the gas giant's turbulent lower atmosphere. Now that the ship had dived below twenty-five thousand kilometers, one-fifth of the way to the planet's core, the eerie sounds of fatiguing metal were becoming almost constant, and the vibrations through the hull were growing more severe by the minute.

Twelve years ago, when T'su had been an ensign, she had been at ops aboard the Enterprise -D as it skimmed the upper atmosphere of Minos while under fire by an automated attack drone. At the time, she'd thought that was a rough ride. Compared to this, that was nothing, she thought, wiping the sweat from her palms.

T'su turned back toward the main viewer, which now showed only a dim outline of the thermal disturbance they were speeding toward. The test of the Wildfire prototype had been about to commence when Lieutenant Sunkulo, her operations officer, had detected an unknown energy signal that mysteriously vanished the moment sensors had been trained on it. If there was another ship in the atmosphere, following the Orion, the mission's security was at risk. T'su had orders to keep the prototype out of the wrong hands at all costs, and she was well aware of the potential for disaster if she

failed.

Right now, however, she was more concerned about the threat to her ship posed by the planet itself. “Current hull temperature and pressure?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady. Always project confidence, she reminded herself.

Sunkulo tapped a few keys and answered calmly. “Temperature is eleven thousand four hundred degrees Celsius. Pressure is twenty-two million G.S.C.” Anticipating his captain’s next request, he added, “Structural integrity field still holding.”

T’su nodded. Around her, the rest of the bridge crew was quiet, intensely focused on their work. Lieutenant Fryar was making constant, minor adjustments at the helm to keep the ship steady while Ensign Yarrow relayed his data from the science station to Ryan at tactical. They were using active tachyon scans to map the atmosphere’s thermodynamic layers and currents in order to plot the course the Wildfire device would take to the planet’s core. The data was being constantly uploaded to Lieutenant ch’Kelavar, the ship’s Andorian second officer, who was in the forward torpedo room with the Wildfire development team.

Another lightning flash caused the main viewer to flare white for a split second. Another thunderclap, magnified by the density of the gas giant’s atmosphere, drowned out the sounds of the Orion’s groaning hull plates and shook the ship violently. The lights on the bridge flickered for a moment, and several display screens became scrambled and failed to recover even after the shaking ceased. T’su winced as the acrid odor of burned-out isolinear chips assaulted her nostrils.

Commander Dakona Raal, the ship’s imposing first officer, placed a reassuring hand on T’su’s shoulder. She silently smiled her thanks to him, and he nodded almost imperceptibly in return and moved his hand away before anyone else on the bridge noticed it had been there.

A native of Rigel V, Raal had been mistaken for a Vulcan by almost every member of the crew when he first came aboard last year. He had responded by shaving his head bald, growing a goatee, and making a point of leading a Klingon folk music sing-along during the crew’s last shore leave. He also had learned to cook ahasperat so spicy it could knock the nasal ridges off a Bajoran, and Dr. Cindrich, the ship’s chief medical officer, had described Raal’s unrestrained laughter as “infectious.”

Raal was unorthodox, brash, and sometimes a bit too obviously attracted to T’su for her comfort, but at times like this she was glad to have him close by. This was her first command, and although ferrying a contingent of Starfleet Corps of Engineers specialists wouldn’t have been her first choice of assignments, the past month had taught her it was rarely boring. Through it all, Raal had proved himself to be an exemplary first officer, the one T’su could always count on in a crisis.

But this crisis was getting too close for comfort.

“Lieutenant Ryan, stand by to deploy the Wildfire device on my mark. Helm, as soon as it’s away, get us out of here, best possible speed.”

Ryan and Fryar both acknowledged and continued to tap keys. “We’re ready, Captain,” Ryan said. T’su leaned forward in her seat, about to give the order, when the image on the main viewer changed.

The low hum of activity on the bridge ceased as everyone turned toward the viewscreen. A latticework of glowing colors seemed to be growing around the ship like a coral reef; grids of light, in parallel and perpendicular rows, surrounded the Orion like a cage of energy. T’su snapped her crew back into action.

“Tactical, what is that? Is it Tholian?”

“Negative, Captain. The energy signature doesn’t match any known configuration.”

T’su swiveled toward her science officer. “Yarrow, tell me something useful.”

Yarrow studied his display. T’su could tell something was wrong; when Yarrow was alarmed, his mane puffed out and his whiskers twitched. Right now, his mane was twice its normal size. “It’s a photonic energy grid, Captain, source unknown. I can’t determine its—”

“It’s shrinking!” Sunkulo said. T’su spun back toward the main viewer in time to see the image dissolve into static. Sunkulo’s console was rapidly dominated by warning lights. “We’re losing power all over the ship!”

T’su clenched her jaw as a powerful shock wave rattled the ship. “All decks! Damage reports!”

“We just lost comms,” said Ryan. He pressed futilely at his console, which was stuttering its way into darkness like every other panel on the bridge. T’su found herself barraged with reports from every direction at once. Helm wasn’t answering, auxiliary power was failing, tactical was offline. The voices overlapped, frantic and hoarse, struggling to be heard over the din of wrenching metal. One voice cut through the clamor, firm and quiet.

“Captain,” Raal said gravely. “We’re about to lose the structural integrity field.” T’su looked at Raal, saw the hardness of his expression, and realized this was the no-win scenario she’d been warned about at the Academy all those years ago. “Recommend we release the log buoy, sir.”

T’su nodded curtly, and felt her thoughts turn inward as Raal bellowed the order to Sunkulo. Seconds later, the buoy was away. T’su shivered from adrenaline overload as the bridge lights faded and the bridge slipped into total darkness. She covered her ears as the shrieking of the hull became deafening and the atmosphere’s turbulence hammered her ship.

As a flash of lightning a hundred times larger than anything T’su had ever seen on Earth tore through the bridge, the last thing she felt was a hand on her shoulder.

Chapter

2

Bart Faulwell strolled into the Vinci’s mess hall and passed Carol Abramowitz on his way to the replicator. He glanced at the short, dark-haired woman, who was so deeply engrossed in whatever she was reading on a Starfleet-issue padd that she had allowed her raisin oatmeal to go cold and congeal into a hardened mass in the bowl in front of her.

“The butler did it,” he said. Abramowitz seemed not to notice his comment. Then, with some effort, she pulled her attention away from her reading material.

“Huh?”

“I said, ‘The butler did it.’” He noted the complete lack of comprehension in the cultural specialist’s expression. “You were so entranced,” he said, “I figured you must be reading a mystery of some sort.”

“No, no. Actually, I’ve been fascinated by Keorgan art ever since that mission we went on with Soloman a few months ago. I had no idea their photonic cloud sculptures could be so elaborate. Understanding their aesthetic is like opening a door into their collective psyche.”

“Sounds fascinating,” he said. “Want to see something completely different?” Abramowitz looked up at the bearded, middle-aged cryptographer and linguist. He was keenly excited about his latest endeavor and was certain that if he didn’t show someone soon, he’d simply burst. Carol put down her padd and sighed.

“My answer makes no difference, does it?”

“Not really.” Faulwell turned to the replicator. “Computer: Faulwell Test One.” With an almost musical hum of activity, a swirling vortex of molecules began to reorganize themselves inside the replicator’s service area. A few seconds later, a dog-eared and coffee-stained leather-bound copy of Melville’s Moby-Dick had formed.

Faulwell picked up the book, flipped it open to its title page, and handed it to Abramowitz. She examined it and saw his signature, the ink seemingly as fresh as if he had just signed it. “Perfect, right?” he said. “Accurate down to the indentation the pen made in the page. It even has the same smell as the original,” which, he noted with pleasure, was a comingling of old paper and worn leather.

She looked back up at Faulwell. “So?” He picked up the book and snapped it shut in one hand with a theatrical flourish.

“The point, my unobservant friend, is that for the past year, I’ve been a fool.”

“I could have told you that.”

“More specifically,” Faulwell said, ignoring her remark, “I’ve been writing my letters to Anthony on paper and reading them to him in subspace messages. Then, on those rare occasions when I get to see him in person, I’ve been giving him letters he’s already heard me read to him.”

“So you’ve decided to start reading him chapters from Moby-Dick? That’s romantic,” she deadpanned. He sat down across from her and held up the book in both hands.

“What if I told you this book is actually still in my quarters right now? Or, I should say, the original is still in my quarters.”

Abramowitz caught on. “You made a replicator pattern of your book.”

“Exactly. And I can do the same for my letters to Anthony and send them to him, attached to subspace messages.”

She took the book from him and began flipping through it. “Very clever. You worked this out yourself?”

Faulwell shrugged. “I had some help from Diego,” he said, referring to the da Vinci’s transporter chief, Diego Feliciano. “He seemed happy to have a project to work on,” Faulwell said. “I think he’s as bored as the rest of us, going around in circles out here.”

“You see, that’s your problem: you don’t know how to appreciate downtime.” She put down the book,

stood up and placed her bowl of now rock-hard oatmeal back into the replicator for matter reclamation. She touched the control pad, and the bowl vanished in a whirlpool of dissociated atoms. She turned back toward Faulwell. "Gomez and her team are having a grand old time building their... whatever it is—"

"It's a mobile mining platform and refinery."

"Whatever. There's no one trying to steal it, kill us, or start a war. Do you want Gold to send us off to some remote planet? With no backup or hope of rescue when our supposedly simple mission inevitably goes tragically wrong?"

He pretended to think about that for a moment, even though he knew the answer was obvious. "No."

Abramowitz leaned in close and whispered into his ear with an intensity that was only half in jest. "Then shut up."

* * *

Captain David Gold lay on his back on the biobed, with his arms folded behind his head, admiring the details of the ceiling of the *Vinci* sickbay. Dr. Elizabeth Lense, the ship's chief medical officer, stood beside the bed and methodically waved her medical scanner back and forth above her commanding officer's torso. The scanner's high-pitched oscillations rose and fell in a steady cadence.

"Three minutes you've been scanning the same spot," Gold said. "Maybe something I should know?"

"No, sir. Physically, you check out in perfect shape."

"You mean, for a man my age?"

"No, I mean you're in perfect shape." She put away her medical scanner and entered some notes on a padd. "Though I am considering putting you down for a psychiatric consult."

Gold sat up slightly, supporting himself on his elbows. His white eyebrows were raised in an expression of displeased surprise. "Excuse me?"

Lense held her poker face for a very long two seconds, then broke into a wide grin. "You might be the first captain in Starfleet history to volunteer for his annual physical." Gold's expression softened, and he swung his legs off the bed and sat up. "Most skippers," Lense added, "have to be hounded like a Ferengi on tax day to show up for their exam."

Gold stood and stretched his lean, thin body. He let out a relieved groan as the crick in his back went pop and vanished.

"How do you think I stay in such good shape? Not by ignoring my doctors." Gold picked up his uniform jacket from on top of the console next to the bed. He put it on and studied Lense as she walked to her desk and transferred her notes into the computer. "And how have you been, Doctor?"

"You mean physically?" she said, in a tone that let Gold know she understood exactly what he was really asking. A few weeks earlier, he had had to call her to task for letting her work slip because of problems with depression. She had begun relying too much on Emmett, the ship's Emergency Medical Hologram, to handle her everyday patient care. Gold, fortunately, had stepped in and helped Lense get back on track.

“I mean, in general,” he said.

Lense sat down in her chair, her posture straight yet relaxed. “Busy, believe it or not,” she said. She folded her hands in front of her. “With security and engineering escalating their little practical joke war over the past two weeks, I’ve had to deal with some interesting cases. Lipinski and Robins came in with the ends of their hair fused together at a molecular level.” She chortled softly and shook her head. “The smell was horrendous. Separating them without shaving their heads made for a very entertaining afternoon.”

Gold chuckled. “I’m sure it did. Any idea who the culprit was?”

Lense nodded. “My best guess would be Conlon.”

“Mine, too. And you avoided answering my question.”

Lense tapped her index finger on the desktop for a moment. “You’re right. But I think what you need is a second opinion. Computer, activate Emergency Medical Hologram.”

A blurry, humanoid-shaped holographic image appeared between Lense and Gold and quickly formed into the trim, dark-skinned, and friendly visage of Emmett. He came into focus, surveyed the serene sickbay, and smiled at Gold. “Good afternoon, Captain,” he said, then turned his head to offer a friendly nod to Lense. “Doctor.”

“Hi, Emmett,” Lense said warmly. “The captain requires an update on my medical status.”

Emmett turned to face Gold. “Doctor Lense has shown marked improvement over the past few weeks, sir. Her sleep patterns have returned to normal, and her energy level has increased. Overall, I would evaluate her psychological status as stable. Emotionally, she seems to be in good spirits.”

Gold cocked an eyebrow and flashed a crooked grin at Emmett. “Really? Good news. Very good.” Gold stroked his chin. He hated to continue this line of inquiry, but he needed to be sure she was really recovering and not simply masking her symptoms. He respected Lense, but he couldn’t afford to be too trusting. “What percentage of sickbay’s walk-in cases have you treated over the past six weeks, Emmett?”

“Actually, sir, I haven’t attended a patient in the past four and a half weeks, since shortly after we arrived in the Tenber system. Dr. Lense has activated me only to assist with her lab work, and only when her scheduled sleep cycles coincide with those of Medical Technician Copper and Nurse Wetzell.”

Gold nodded, very pleased with the report. “Thank you, Emmett.”

Emmett smiled back. “You’re welcome, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you today?”

“No, thank you, Emmett. We’ll let you know if we need you.”

Emmett nodded, then blurred and dissolved with a barely audible hum of photonic generators shifting into standby mode.

Gold looked at Lense, who couldn’t conceal her expression of self-satisfaction. Normally, her cockiness would have irked him, but considering the turnaround she’d made, he couldn’t hold it against her. “Well,

Doctor. Sounds to me like you've earned a bowl of my wife's matzoh-ball soup. Or, at least, a fairly good replicated facsimile of it. Join me for lunch?"

"It would be my pleasure, sir." Lense rose from her desk and fell into step next to Gold. They reached the door, then halted as the comm chirped. The voice that followed was that of Lieutenant David McAllan, the ship's spit-and-polish tactical officer. "Bridge to Captain Gold."

"Gold here."

"Captain, we're picking up an emergency signal from a Starfleet vessel, with a message on an encrypted channel."

Gold frowned. "Put it through to my ready room. I'll be there in a moment. Gold out." He looked at Lense, and sighed heavily. "I'm afraid I'll have to give you a rain check on that free lunch, Doctor."

Lense shrugged. "That's okay, sir. I've always known there's no such thing."

* * *

Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer of the *theda Vinci* and leader of the ship's S.C.E. contingent, monitored her team's progress as she stood and sipped her Earl Grey tea at the center console on the lower level of the operations center aboard *Whiteflower Station*. The spacious, two-level, state-of-the-art command area of the traveling mining platform was large enough to accommodate up to thirty people during normal operations. Right now, however, its only occupants were Gomez and Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, her second-in-command on the S.C.E. team.

Duffy was at the rear of the upper level, half-inside an open bulkhead, his beeping and chirping tricorder in one hand and a sonic screwdriver in the other. The tall, blond engineer was searching methodically, but with expiring patience, for a fault in the command center's wiring that the diagnostic program was unable to track down, for reasons that were equally elusive. Gomez caught the sound of muffled swearing from behind the bulkhead, but couldn't make out the words.

She heard an echoing, metallic banging that she surmised was Duffy's sonic screwdriver being pounded like a hammer against a duranium bulkhead. "Everything all right?" she said teasingly, amused at Duffy's mounting frustration over what initially seemed to be a simple problem.

"Fine," Duffy said, clearly irritated. "Never better."

"You should take a break."

Duffy sighed heavily. He turned off his tricorder, put it back into a holster on his belt, and pulled himself free of the bulkhead. He looked around the nearly finished operations center. Two of the three large monitors that dominated the front wall showed the *theda Vinci*'s two new "Work Bugs"—larger, three-seat versions of Starfleet's one-person work pods, designed for heavy-duty industrial operations.

P8 Blue was piloting Work Bug One like a natural. Fabian Stevens was piloting Work Bug Two, but with far less finesse. Blue had spent the past five weeks showing Stevens the ropes, teaching him the finer points of the crafts' controls. Together with two assistant engineers in each pod, Blue and Stevens were making excellent progress securing the station's pristine white exterior hull plates.

For the past five weeks the *theda Vinci* had been in orbit around Tenber VII, a strikingly beautiful, ringed

gas giant planet. Gomez and her team had been assigned to construct a mobile mining platform and refinery that would roam the planet's rings, seeking out such precious ores as dilithium and ultritium, which a Starfleet advance scout had detected here in abundance a few months ago.

The S.C.E. team had been busy since they arrived, most of them volunteering for double shifts on the mining station and refinery, which they soon nicknamed "Whiteflower" because of its gleaming, ivory-hued duranium hull plating and five, teardrop-shaped sections that extended outward at regular intervals from the equator of its hemispherical, central engineering hub. Not long afterward, the name became official, much to the crew's collective amusement.

Duffy sleeved the sweat from his forehead as he walked to the replicator. He rubbed the back of his aching neck as he ordered. "Computer: quinine water with a twist of lime."

"That item is not currently listed in the replicator databank," the computer said.

Duffy stared at the replicator with a glare of equal parts anger and disgust. He closed his eyes and drooped his head in defeat. "You've got to be kidding me." He stood, arms akimbo, anticipating the computer's inevitable, overly literal reply. It didn't come. He opened his eyes, then turned and looked down at Gomez.

"How do you like that, Sonnie? Doesn't it usually make some kind of Vulcanesque remark when we say things like that?"

"I had Soloman reprogram it to ignore rhetorical questions." She reached under her console and picked up a thermos. "I figure I just saved you about an hour per month that you'd have wasted in pointless arguments with the mess hall replicator." She pushed her dark, wavy hair out of her eyes, waved the thermos, and flashed him a come-hither smile. "Care to guess what this is?"

"You know me so well," he said. He grinned and jogged to the short stairway that connected the two levels of the operations center. He hopped up to a sitting position on the rail and slid down it to the lower level, landing on his feet with casual athleticism in front of the petite brunette. She handed him the smooth, metallic, curve-topped thermos. He removed the cap and gulped down two mouthfuls of quinine water, then gasped contentedly. "That hit the spot."

He's like a boy sometimes, she thought as she sipped her Earl Grey and studied him out of the corner of her eye, watching the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he downed another swig of quinine water. They had been attracted to each other almost immediately when they had met aboard the Enterprise over a decade ago, and had dated briefly, but it ended amicably when she transferred to the Oberth. Then, after nearly eight years apart, they found themselves together again aboard the da Vinci.

But the situation had changed: she was now his boss, and that had made their renewed romance more than a little awkward. She constantly had to remind herself that reigniting their affair had been her idea, part of the "live life while you can" philosophy she had embraced after her brush with death on Sarindar. She thought she could live in the moment, the way he did, but lately she was becoming less certain. I love him, and I know he loves me... but he's always leaping from one adventure to another. He never thinks about the future.

"Sonnie," he said, suddenly unable to look her in the eye, "I've been thinking."

Oh, no.

“About tonight—”

“You mean dinner with Fabe and Domenica?”

“Yeah.” He self-consciously combed his fingers through his short hair. “I was wondering, I mean—”

“Tell me you’re not canceling.”

He inhaled through clenched teeth. “Not exactly. I was thinking we might...reschedule?” She tilted her head to one side and glared reproachfully at him.

“Kieran, you were the one who said we should have dinner with them, that you wanted to ‘bury the hatchet’ with Corsi. You even had real Betazed oysters and Risan white wine brought in on the last supply ship.”

“I know, it’s just...well, I wanted tonight—”

“What is it about her that makes you act like this?”

“What’re you—”

“Do you hate her that much?”

“I don’t hate her, Sonnie, I—”

“Then what is it? Why do you get weird every time her name comes up? What, are you two having an affair or something?”

Duffy’s face was flushed red and his voice pitched upward. “Damn it, Sonnie, this has nothing to do with her.”

“Then what’s it about?” She looked at him, trying to read through his eyes what was going on in that mysterious mind of his. His jaw was moving, but no sound was coming from his mouth. She had seen him go through this kind of struggle only once before, when he had asked her out on their first date aboard the Enterprise. He took a deep breath—

Their combadges both chirped. “Gold to all personnel.” Gomez noted that Gold’s voice was unusually grim and terse. “We have new orders. Secure the Whiteflower station and report back to da Vinci immediately. S.C.E. staff, assemble in the observation lounge on the double. Gold out.”

Gomez looked at Duffy, who clearly had detected the same bad omens in Gold’s message that she had. She tried to lighten the moment. “You were saying...?”

He frowned. “I guess it’ll have to wait.” He turned away from her and climbed back up the stairs toward the operations center’s only working turbolift. She hesitated, then followed him up the stairs and into the turbolift.

“Level six, transporter room,” he said as the turbolift doors slid shut with a pneumatic swish.

“Kieran, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” he said in a clipped, neutral tone that she knew meant something serious was on his mind. “Never better.”

Chapter 3

Domenica Corsi, the chief of security aboard the *Vinci*, hurried down the corridor toward the briefing room, fumbling to get her hair tied back into its customary, tighter-than-regulation bun. She had switched from alpha shift to gamma shift four weeks ago and had finally become accustomed to her new sleep schedule. Gold’s urgent summons had just roused her from a particularly pleasant dreamscape, her first in a long while.

She blinked her eyes hard to dispel the fuzzy border around the edges of her vision, finished securing her blond hair into place, and stepped inside the observation lounge.

The room was unusually quiet. Captain Gold was already there, standing behind his regular seat, his expression somber as he stared at the reflective black surface of the table. Lense, Faulwell, and Abramowitz had taken their seats and were conspicuously not speaking.

Corsi moved to her own seat as Soloman, the ship’s Bynar computer specialist, entered behind her, followed moments later by engineers Fabian Stevens and P8 Blue, a Nasat whose compact, insectoid form Corsi sometimes envied for its resilience. P8, whom most of the ship’s complement called “Pattie,” settled into a seat specially designed for her multilimbed physiology, located at the far end of the table from the captain.

Last to enter the briefing room were Duffy and Gomez. Duffy looked scuffed, while Gomez was the very picture of composure. Corsi sensed an unusual level of tension between the two, but under the circumstances, it was difficult to know how to read their moods. Gold looked up at Gomez as she moved to her chair, immediately to his right. His speech was curt and direct.

“Commander, are all the *Vinci* personnel accounted for?”

“Yessir,” Gomez said quickly, a bit surprised by Gold’s sudden formality. If he noticed, he gave no sign of it that Corsi could see.

“Gold to bridge.”

“Go ahead, sir,” McAllan said over the comm.

“Set course for the Galvan system, maximum warp. Engage when ready.”

“Aye, sir.”

Gold leaned forward slowly, as if he were resisting a terrible weight pressing down upon him, and rested his palms flat on the tabletop. The throbbing hum of the small ship’s warp engines kicked in, distant, deep and familiar.

“About an hour ago, we received an automated distress call from the starship *Orion*,” Gold said. “She ejected her log buoy after suffering a massive onboard failure while navigating in the atmosphere of a gas

giant. The data from the buoy's flight recorder is not good." Corsi watched Gold's hands close slowly into fists as his jaw clenched. "We have reason to believe the Orion went down with all hands, including seventy-one S.C.E. personnel."

"Oh, God," Gomez said, a look of dread draining the color from her face. She composed herself and looked quickly back up at Gold. "The Orion was Lian T'su's ship, sir. I—" A look passed quickly between her and Duffy. "She was a friend."

Gold nodded compassionately at Gomez, then looked back at the rest of the group. "There's more, of course. What you're about to hear is classified."

Corsi started. If classified information was being bandied about, she wondered whether or not non-coms should be present. Eyes-only information usually wasn't for the eyes of enlisted personnel like Stevens, Faulwell, Soloman, Blue, and Abramowitz. But she trusted that the captain knew what he was doing.

"We've been informed by Starfleet Command that when the Orion went down, her S.C.E. team was testing a new, prototype stellar-ignition warhead, code-named Wildfire."

Gold turned toward the monitor behind him and activated it. It displayed a detailed schematic of a torpedo-shaped device and a seemingly endless scroll of technical data running up the screen along one side. "It's protomatter-fueled, and capable of initiating stellar-core fusion. Its stated purpose is to aid in terraforming by turning gas giants—such as Galvan VI—into small dwarf stars to provide extra energy sources for remote planets."

Corsi considered the device's other potential uses. Every scenario she could think of gave her a sick feeling in her stomach. She had to ask.

"What if this device were deployed into an existing star?"

Gold fixed her with a stern look. "It would depend on the mass of the target," he said. "Small stars would supernova within a matter of minutes. Midsized ones might take up to an hour to explode. An extremely large star could possibly be turned into a supermassive black hole that would begin swallowing neighboring systems." Gold scanned the faces of his staff; the dismayed glances that were crisscrossing the table confirmed they all grasped the scope of the crisis. "So, as I'm sure you all understand, Starfleet is particularly anxious for us to recover the device."

"Sir," Duffy said, straining to keep his tone of voice diplomatic. "What about the Orion?"

Gold cleared his throat—more, Corsi suspected, out of diplomacy than out of genuine need. "She went down in neutral territory, which means salvage rights go to whoever reaches her first. Starfleet has made our chief priority the safe recovery of the device—with the salvage of the ship and the rescue of her crew, if possible, a close second."

Corsi nodded, envisioning numerous potential complications. "Sir, we should also be prepared for the possibility that the Orion was the victim of a hostile action," she said. "And even if it wasn't, its distress signal might have attracted unwanted attention."

"I already have McAllan working on tactical options, coordinate with him," Gold said. "We'll reach Galvan VI in about nine hours, and we'll be going into the atmosphere as soon as possible after that. Faulwell, Abramowitz: work with McAllan and Corsi—give them any insight you can into threat forces we might run into out here. Gomez, you and your team have nine hours to work out a plan for recovering

the device.” He glanced at Duffy. “And hopefully, the Orion.”

Gold didn’t look Lense in the eye as he spoke to her. “Doctor, I don’t expect there to be survivors aboard the Orion, but prepare sickbay, just in case.”

“We’ll be ready, sir.”

“That’s it, then. Reconvene here at 2100 hours. Dismissed.”

Corsi lagged behind as the rest of the group filed out. She understood now why Gold had included the entire S.C.E. team in the briefing despite the high security—in this instance, they did need to know if they were going to do their jobs right.

Duffy, Corsi noted, walked quickly out of the lounge, Gomez half a step behind him, with no eye contact passing between them. He’s pretending not to be hiding something, Corsi deduced, and she’s pretending not to be bothered by it. Wonder what’s going on there? Before she could think of possible explanations, she realized Fabian Stevens was standing just behind her right shoulder.

“I guess this means no oysters tonight,” he said.

Corsi sighed. “Guess so.”

She still didn’t know what to make of her budding friendship with Stevens, whom she had begun calling “Fabe” whenever they were alone together—a situation that had become more frequent during their extended assignment in the Tenber system. It had been several months since their spontaneous, synthale-fueled one-night stand. She’d asked him to keep the matter to himself and not expect anything to come of it. To her surprise, he had done exactly as she asked.

At first she had been grateful for his discretion, but as time passed she found herself inventing reasons to be near him on away missions and planning her schedule so she’d be in the mess hall when he was. There had even been a few more occasions when they’d been alone together.

When she accepted Gomez’s invitation to join her, Duffy, and Fabe for dinner tonight aboard Whiteflower Station, she had stood in front of the mirror in the quarters she shared with Dr. Lense and asked her reflection, “What are you doing?” As she and Stevens exited the briefing room in pensive silence, she still had absolutely no idea.

Chapter

4

Gomez blinked, not sure she had heard P8 correctly. She considered the possibility that being sequestered in the science lab for over four hours, weighing their options, had caused her to begin having auditory hallucinations. “Towing cables?”

P8 responded to Gomez’s dismissive question by switching the image on the science lab’s main viewer to a computer simulation of the atmosphere of Galvan VI. Blue streams represented fast-moving currents of frigid, supercompressed gas that plunged in vortices from the upper, colder regions of the atmosphere toward the planet’s superheated core. Reddish patterns indicated upswells of superheated, lower-density gas and fluid. Green and yellow patterns marked areas of intense electromagnetic disturbance.

“The icospectrogram we received from Starfleet only goes down to around ten thousand kilometers,” P8 said. “That’s less than half the distance to the Orion, and the severity of ionic disturbances at that depth will disrupt our shields, phasers, transporters, and tractor beams. Assuming the Orion is incapacitated, a series of five-centimeter duranium towing cables is our best hope for pulling it out.”

Gomez tapped her finger on the side of her half-full mug of Earl Grey tea, which had long since changed from steaming hot to room temperature. She shook her head. “I don’t know, Pattie. It just seems so...low-tech.”

“Sometimes the best solution is the simplest one,” Stevens chimed in. “We have about two hours before we make orbit. We could replicate the cables with time to spare if we start now.”

Gomez looked at the other specialists gathered in the lab. Ensign Nancy Conlon, a petite brunette human, and Lieutenant Ina Mar, the ship’s athletic, red-haired Bajoran senior ops officer, stood next to one another. Both women nodded slowly as they considered P8’s proposal. Gomez glanced at Duffy. He was nodding, as well. “I think she’s right,” Duffy said. “We don’t have time to recalibrate the tractor beams. Crazy as it sounds, this is the way to go.”

“With our shields offline, we’ll have to reroute all shield generator output to the structural integrity field,” Stevens added. “Otherwise, the pressure in the lower atmosphere will squash us like a bug.” A split second later he winced and turned toward P8. “No offense.”

“Just wait till I find a good analogy for a bag of meat,” the Nasat said.

“All right,” Gomez said, cutting them off. “Fabian, start replicating the cables to P8’s specs. Pattie, go over the schematics for the Orion and plan where you want to anchor the tow lines. You and Fabian will handle the hookup with the new Work Bugs.”

“Oh yippee,” Stevens said glumly, which prompted a tinkly laugh-equivalent from P8.

Gomez turned to Duffy. “Kieran, you’ll try to restore auxiliary power—maybe we can fly Orion out instead of towing her. I’ll search for survivors while Corsi retrieves the Wildfire device and Soloman recovers the logs. Nancy, since we can’t transport to the Orion, I’ll need you to whip up some null-field generators to help us pilot the Work Bugs in that atmosphere. Mar, you’re in charge of rerouting da Vinci’s shield generators to the SIF.”

Gomez noted with satisfaction that even once she stopped talking, she still held everyone’s full attention. “Everyone clear?” She was met by a chorus of acknowledgments. “All right, let’s get to work. Dismissed.”

As the group broke up and moved toward the door, Gomez reached out and gently took hold of Duffy’s sleeve. He stopped and waited until the others had left. Stevens was the last person out, and he tossed a sympathetic glance Duffy’s way as the door shut with a soft, hydraulic hiss.

“What’s going on?” Duffy said with a nonchalant half-grin.

Gomez normally found Duffy’s ability to smile his way out of a tense situation charming. Now, suddenly, she found it maddening. “I was going to ask you the same thing. You were about to tell me something when we were back on Whiteflower. What was it?”

Duffy wasn't smiling anymore. "Now probably isn't the time, Sonnie." Gomez felt acid churning in her stomach. Something was wrong, and he was stalling.

"Kieran, I can tell something's on your mind." She moved close to him, reached up and softly pressed her right palm against his cheek. She was always amazed at how warm his skin was. "You know you can talk to me. What do you want to tell me?"

He reached up and took her hand in his, and slowly lowered it away from his face. Gomez steeled herself for the breakup speech she could see coming from light-years away.

With his free hand he reached inside his uniform jacket and, still holding her hand, knelt in front of her. Gomez watched numbly as his hand emerged from his jacket, an exquisitely crafted gold band, set with a diamond, held firmly between his thumb and forefinger. He handed it to her as he looked up. With great effort, she looked away from the diamond ring in her hand and back at him.

"Sonya, I love you," he said in the most sincere tone of voice she had ever heard him use. "I want us to share the rest of our lives together. And before you start lecturing me about Starfleet and duty, I want you to know I'll resign if I have to, because I'll pick you over Starfleet any day. So, to make a short question long, I'm asking for the honor and privilege of being your husband. Sonnie... will you marry me?"

For several long seconds, Gomez was convinced her heart had stopped beating. She forced herself to breathe, but despite her best efforts she couldn't think of a single word to say to Duffy, who was now looking very self-conscious and awkward down on one knee. Five seconds of silence stretched into ten, at which point Duffy stood up, his hopeful expression melting into one of desperation.

"Sonnie, please say something."

Gomez closed her eyes and pressed her free hand to her forehead to stave off the fever she could feel forming.

"Sonnie?"

Gomez felt the strength in her legs ebbing. She sat down next to the center worktable and let out a heavy sigh. We're on our way to recover a device of unspeakable destructive potential from the wreck of a ship on which one of my first friends at the Academy just died. Under the circumstances, I probably could've handled being dumped. But this—

She opened her eyes as she heard the wish of the lab door opening. Duffy was halfway out the door before she called out to him. "Kieran!" He kept going without looking back, and the door slid shut behind him.

Gomez stared at the closed door, then looked back at the sparkling diamond and noted its latinum setting. The fact that the stone was set in latinum meant the ring couldn't have been replicated. It must have cost Kieran a fortune, she thought. He must be the sweetest man I've ever known.... So why don't I know what my answer is?

As she tucked the ring into her inside jacket pocket and made a mental note to return it to Duffy later, a fresh wave of acid provoked muted growls from her stomach.

Chapter

5

McAllan stood up from the center seat on the bridge as Gold stepped out of the turbolift. “Captain on the bridge!” he said as he moved to his post at tactical.

Gold nodded politely to McAllan and strode to his chair. He had resisted McAllan’s insistence on formality and protocol when the young lieutenant first came aboard a few years ago. After McAllan’s first year on the bridge, Gold had learned not to mind it so much. Lately, he’d grown accustomed to it and had started letting McAllan take the conn from time to time.

“Report,” Gold said as he sat down.

“We’re in standard orbit over Galvan VI, sir,” McAllan said. “Ensign Conlon has finished prepping the Work Bugs for deployment into the atmosphere. The away team is standing by.”

“Good,” Gold said. “Ina, do we have a lock on the Orion?”

“Affirmative,” she said. “Active tachyon scans show her circling the planet’s equatorial region at a depth of approximately twenty-nine thousand kilometers. She appears to be derelict, sir, being pulled by a descending current.”

“What’s the weather like down there?”

“Atmospheric pressure is over forty-two thousand bars, temperature is approximately eleven hundred degrees Celsius,” Ina said. “Velocity of atmospheric currents varies from four thousand to seven thousand KPH. And it looks like Orion’s heading for some choppy weather—she’ll hit a region of severe thermal upswells in less than two hours. After that, her path intersects a vortex that’ll pull her down into a layer of liquid-metal hydrogen.”

Gold turned his chair to face McAllan, who was studying a readout at his station. “Any sign of company?” Gold said.

“No, sir,” McAllan said. “Long-range scans are clear, and we haven’t picked up any ships in orbit or in the atmosphere.”

“Faulwell, any signal traffic I should know about?”

“None,” Faulwell said from the communications station, where he’d been since they warped into the system. “We thought the Gorn might send a patrol to investigate the Orion’s mayday, but they don’t seem to have detected it—or us.”

“Let’s keep it that way, if we can.” Gold studied the deceptively placid-looking, bluish gray sphere of Galvan VI on the main viewer. “Wong? Think you can handle that?”

Songmin Wong, the da Vinci’s boyish-looking helm officer, turned and looked back at Gold. “No problem, sir. It’s well within our operating parameters.”

“It was within the Orion’s parameters,” Gold noted grimly. “Plot an intercept course for the Orion, best

possible speed.”

“Aye, sir.”

Gold took a slow, deep breath as he watched the shape of the gas giant grow larger on the main viewer and finally fill it completely. The planet’s subtle striations of color grew more distinct as the *Vinci* plunged headlong toward the upper atmosphere. Then the viewer crackled with static and the ship lurched violently as it penetrated the upper cloud layer and began its descent into the semifluid darkness.

“Time to intercept?”

“Twenty-one minutes, sir,” Wong said.

“Gold to Gomez. Prepare to deploy your away team.”

“Aye, sir,” Gomez replied over the comm. Gold detected the rising howl of swift, powerful atmospheric currents buffeting his ship—and he felt his fingers tighten reflexively on the arms of his chair.

* * *

The *Vinci* shuttle bay buzzed with activity as Conlon and four other engineers scrambled to make final tweaks to the null-field generators they’d just installed on the two yellow Work Bugs. The industrial-grade work vehicles were bulkier, more durable, and more powerful than the average Starfleet-issue Work Bees, but they were slower and would need all the protection possible.

Gomez tried to ignore the muffled shrieks of high-velocity wind that were audible even through the *Vinci*’s hull. She focused instead on checking the seals and readouts on Corsi’s environment suit. Several meters away, Stevens and Duffy were completing their own suit checks, and behind them, Soloman and P8 took turns verifying each other’s specially made environmental gear. Soloman’s was fitted for his short, slender body and larger-proportioned head. P8’s suit permitted full mobility with all of her eight limbs, and she could retract its arms if she needed to assume her curled-in, defensive posture.

Gomez slapped her thickly gloved hand on Corsi’s shoulder. “You’re good to go,” she said. “Everybody ready?”

Stevens gave Gomez a thumbs-up signal, and P8 and Soloman nodded. “All right,” Gomez said, “Corsi, you’re with me and Pattie. Kieran, Soloman, you’ll be flying with Fabian. Let’s go.” The two trios split up and clambered awkwardly into the Work Bugs.

Inside Bug One, P8 settled comfortably behind the controls, her small size compensating for the added bulk of the pressure suit. She began powering up the Work Bug as Gomez sealed the hatch. Normally, the vehicles could seat three comfortably, but in full environment suits it was a tight fit, a situation that for Gomez only exacerbated the feeling of confinement she felt whenever she put on the clumsy gear. She settled into the vehicle’s rear seat as Stevens’s voice came over the comm. “Bug Two is all set, Commander.”

“Acknowledged,” Gomez said. “Gomez to bridge. We’re ready to launch, Captain.” A powerful tremor shook the *Vinci* and rattled both Work Bugs as a resounding boom of thunder echoed through the ship.

“Stand by,” Gold said. “Three minutes to intercept.”

Gomez felt the first bead of sweat trickle down her spine. Three minutes, she told herself. Three minutes sitting still in this suit, while the ship flies straight into a navigational nightmare that I'm about to face in this souped-up cargo pod. The claps of thunder and violent shaking became more intense and frequent. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and began counting backward from one hundred eighty.

* * *

It took every shred of willpower Duffy possessed to sit still. He almost wished he were piloting Bug Two instead of Stevens, but his friend was the one who had spent the past month learning to fly the heavy-duty utility craft.

Despite the acoustic insulation of his environment suit and the Work Bug itself, Duffy could hear the unmistakable groaning of stressed metal as the Vinci's hull protested its descent into the crushing depths of the gas giant's atmosphere.

"Would you listen to that, Fabe? Sounds like we're really putting da Vinci through her paces."

"Tell me about it," Stevens said. "I haven't heard anything like this since Captain Sisko took the Defiant into a gas giant to save a Karemman ship from the Jem'Hadar."

"Please," Soloman said, "not that story again."

"He's right, Fabe, it's the only one you ever tell."

"This from the man who never seems to tire of the Tellarite story," Stevens said. "Fine, I'll change the subject. Did you ask her?"

"Ask who what?" Soloman said, confused.

"He was talking to me," Duffy said. "And yes, I did."

"And?"

"And nothing. She didn't say a damn thing."

"Pardon me," Soloman said. "Who and what are we talking about?"

"No one," Duffy said.

"It's nothing," Stevens said.

"You asked a question about nothing to an entity that does not exist and are surprised to have received no answer," Soloman said, shaking his head in dismay. "And humans wonder why they have trouble communicating with one another."

Duffy stared in mute amusement at Soloman, wondering when the Bynar had found time to master the fine art of sarcasm.

* * *

The image on the *theda Vinci* main viewer was little more than static punctuated at random intervals by flashes of lightning that whited-out the screen and revealed swirling eddies of various liquefied gases raging past the ship at thousands of kilometers per hour. A computer-generated grid of longitudinal and latitudinal markings was superimposed over the image, along with a reference point indicating the position of the *Orion*. That reference point was just above the artificial horizon line and quickly drawing near.

Ina checked her console. “Sixty seconds to intercept.”

A powerful impact knocked Gold forward, halfway out of his seat, and pinned Wong and Ina to their consoles. As Gold pulled himself back into the center seat, he noticed, out of the corner of his eye, McAllan scrambling back to his feet, trying to look like he’d never lost his balance. “Report,” Gold said.

“Thermal upswell, sir,” Ina said. “Small, but enough to overload our inertial dampers.”

“A lot of these we should expect?” Gold said.

“Impossible to predict, sir,” Ina said. “Convective columns have been drifting, disappearing, and reappearing in a chaotic manner. But the *Orion* will be drifting into a region of intense convection columns within ninety-six minutes.”

“Let’s get this over with, then,” Gold said. “Wong, take us to within two kilometers of the *Orion*, then use thrusters to maintain minimum safe distance. The tide down here is fast and rough, so you need to leave room to compensate.”

“Aye, sir,” Wong said. Gold watched the young ensign confidently guide the ship through the maelstrom, seemingly oblivious to the ominous roar of the atmosphere that they’d been unable to mask with acoustic dampening frequencies, despite numerous attempts.

The *Orion* appeared on the *theda Vinci* main viewer, hazy behind a bluish silver veil of swirling gases. The sight of it reminded Gold of a story he used to read to his son, Daniel, when he was a boy—The Flying Dutchman, a tale about a cursed sailing vessel. Looking now at the lifeless husk of the *Orion* on the viewer, Gold couldn’t help but recall the image of the battered, sea-torn Flying Dutchman emerging from a wall of fog.

“Gold to away team. We’ve reached the intercept point. Launch when ready.”

“Acknowledged,” Gomez said.

Gold anxiously folded his arms as he watched the main viewer. Between the *theda Vinci* and the *Orion* enormous bolts of green lightning sliced through the darkness, and he felt the *theda Vinci* shudder as bolt after bolt struck its hull.

The two Work Bugs appeared on the viewer, looking tiny and fragile as they awkwardly dodged the electrical discharges on their journey to the derelict starship. We jump from star to star with ease, Gold mused. Now, two kilometers looks longer than a light-year. Oy, gevalt.

Gold sighed. There was nothing for him to do now but wait.

Chapter

6

Stevens struggled with the sluggish controls to prevent the shearing currents from slamming Bug Two into Bug One. The null-field generators Conlon had installed were helping tremendously—in fact, without them, piloting the Work Bugs in this environment would be impossible—but they consumed enormous amounts of power, and each burst of emerald-colored lightning disrupted the null field just long enough to tumble Bug Two like a rolling die, tossing Duffy and Soloman against one another and the back of Stevens's seat. The inertial dampers were overloading with each lightning strike, and the cabin of Bug Two was thick with smoke and the odor of fried circuits.

The deafening roar of wind had become so omnipresent that Stevens was learning to tune it out, treating it as white noise. Ahead of the Work Bug, the lightning offered him irregular, strobing images of the Orion looming closer, but he chose to rely on the outline of the ship, complete with flight readouts and range to target, provided by the computer in the form of a heads-up display superimposed over the cockpit windshield. The two Work Bugs were now within less than a hundred meters of the Orion. He keyed the comm to Bug One.

“Commander, we’re close enough to start a visual survey.”

“Acknowledged,” Gomez answered. “We’ll take the dorsal hull, you take ventral.”

The two Work Bugs separated. Bug One maneuvered to survey the Orion from above, while Stevens slowly guided Bug Two beneath the Steamrunner-class starship, which was nearly twice the size of the Saber-class da Vinci.

“Activating filters,” Stevens said as he keyed a switch. Like a wash of color, a tint swept across Bug Two’s windshield, neutralizing much of the haze and distortion that blocked their view. Suddenly, the Orion became clearly visible, dominating the view outside the cockpit. Duffy inched forward past Soloman to get a view of the crippled vessel, and craned his neck sharply to look up at its underside.

“Damn,” Duffy muttered. He pointed upward. “Fabe, look at that.” Stevens glanced where Duffy was pointing. The Orion’s secondary hull was blasted away in large sections, the framework beneath it twisted and bent inward. Duffy activated the scanners as Stevens keyed the comm.

“We’re seeing some heavy damage on the ventral secondary hull,” Stevens said. “Looks like concussive damage from atmospheric shock waves.”

“Readings are consistent with antimatter detonations,” Duffy said. “Could’ve been photon or quantum torpedoes.”

“Dorsal hull is intact,” Gomez replied. “We’re not reading any life signs in the primary hull. Do you have any in the engineering section?”

“Negative,” Duffy said. “And it looks like she’s partially flooded. Internal pressure is reading just over two hundred bars.”

“That’s not too bad,” P8 said over the open channel. “It means Orion still has some hull integrity.”

“It’s time to go in,” Gomez said. “We’ll dock Bug One at the forward ventral hatch. Fabian, dock Bug Two at the starboard dorsal hatch. Once we’re in, you and Pattie will continue your survey, figure out

where to attach the tow lines.”

“Acknowledged,” Stevens said as he swiveled Bug Two around and began moving it toward Orion’s starboard docking hatch. Duffy and Soloman secured their helmets in place. Duffy grabbed a portable tool kit. Soloman picked up a slender case containing an emergency data-recovery terminal. Stevens fastened his own helmet into place, looked over his shoulder at the pair, and grinned. “Get ready for a little bump,” he said.

Bug Two slammed hard against the Orion. The impact knocked Duffy and Soloman hard against the bulkhead and sent them toppling to the deck. The clang of the magnetic docking seal finding its mark rang out like a bell inside Bug Two. It was followed by the grinding of docking seals securing themselves. Duffy and Soloman got back on their feet as the airlock on the other side of the hatch depressurized with a muffled hiss.

“Nice flying, Fabe,” Duffy deadpanned.

“You know the rule, Duff,” Stevens said. “Any landing you can walk away from....”

Duffy shook his head and opened the hatch. “I think we need to raise our standards.”

“I concur,” Soloman said as he followed Duffy into the airlock and sealed the hatch behind them.

* * *

Gomez paused, her magnetic boots yanking her foot back onto the deck. She strained to see through the soup-like, semiliquid atmosphere that had flooded the corridors of the Orion. Her palm beacon was set to maximum intensity, but it was unable to penetrate more than a few meters into the murk ahead of her.

Considering the carnage that filled the corridors of the Orion, Gomez decided that was probably for the best.

Temperatures inside the ship had been hot enough to sear the flesh off most of the dead, leaving behind skeletons in scorched rags or—in many sections of the ship—pulverized piles of bone and little else. As Gomez pushed forward she felt a rib cage disintegrate, crushed underfoot by her heavy magboots.

The miniaturized null-field generators Conlon had built into the away team’s environment suits alleviated much of the pressure they were experiencing inside the ship, but Gomez’s muscles were already growing fatigued from pushing through the dense mixture of partially liquefied gases, as well as the added strain of fighting against the planet’s intense gravity. The Orion was slowly rolling on its Z-axis as it drifted, and rather than walk on the ceilings or walls, the away team had resorted to magnetic boots. Unfortunately, the planet pulling in one direction and the boots pulling in another made for very slow progress in the flooded passageways.

Her tricorder scanned a twenty-meter radius around her position and relayed its data to a display projected on the inside of her helmet visor. The mean temperature inside the ship had climbed to nearly one hundred thirty degrees Celsius—a mere fraction of the temperature outside the vessel, but more than hot enough to have long since killed any humanoid life-forms on board.

Gomez reminded herself that anything was possible—there might be a shielded area deep inside the ship where survivors held out hope of rescue—and continued her search, even as her hopes of finding anyone alive decreased with each scan.

* * *

Soloman emerged from the interior pressure lock that led to the Orion's main computer core and breathed a sigh of relief. The multiple redundant fail-safes that were a standard element of Starfleet ship design had proved their value once again: even though all the compartments surrounding the main core had been flooded with semiliquid gases, the core itself had remained undamaged, its structural integrity uncompromised.

His tricorder indicated the core was offline, without main or auxiliary power. Its last remaining backups—small emergency batteries built into the core assembly itself—had activated and were keeping the core operating at a minimal level. Soloman opened the case containing the data-recovery terminal and patched into the Orion main computer core. Within seconds the core powered up with a majestic hum and established a link with the small but robust portable unit. Soloman initiated the recovery of the Orion's logs—all of them, from sensor logs to personal and official logs from every member of the crew—and activated his comm.

“Soloman to Commander Gomez,” he said, his delicate, high-pitched voice echoing inside his helmet. “I’ve reached the main computer core and started the recovery of the ship’s logs.”

“Good work,” Gomez said, the strain in her voice belying her exhaustion. “Notify me as soon as you’re finished.”

“Acknowledged.” Soloman closed the channel and stood patiently, staring up at the ceiling of the lower core chamber some fifty feet above his head. He knew, based on the rate of data transfer possible between the portable unit and the main core, that this operation would take at least twenty-eight minutes. He also knew, from his review of the core's design schematics, that the core was structurally stable, that he was standing in one of the safest areas of the ship. But he still wished he were leaving this ship now instead of later.

* * *

Duffy wished he were in the da Vinci mess hall wolfing down a triple-decker roast beef sandwich with his usual quinine water. Somewhere between decks eighteen and nineteen his stomach had reminded him that, in the flurry of activity that had followed the da Vinci's new orders, he had forgotten to eat lunch—and dinner.

He had already written off the Orion's impulse engines as a lost cause. The main fusion reactor had been breached and caused a cascade failure of the entire impulse system. Half the compartment had been destroyed by the initial blast, and the rest had been exposed to atmosphere.

Now he was slogging his way through the main engineering compartment, his palm beacon barely cutting through the dark shroud of liquefied gases. He was surrounded by the scorched-black skeletons of the Orion's engineering crew, many of whom appeared to have died while trying to don pressure suits.

Why didn't she answer me?

Duffy shook his head. Stop that. Don't think about Sonnie. Think about the warp reactor. At least warp reactors make sense.

Duffy felt his way to the railing that circled the warp core, and followed it to the dilithium crystal

chamber. He scanned it, and was pleased to find the crystals inside were undamaged. Then he scanned the interior of the core and wondered why it had been purged. It was structurally sound, and its auxiliary systems were intact, but it had been deactivated. Correction, he thought. At least warp reactors usually make sense.

He found the access hatch to the lowest level of the ship. He descended slowly, the planet's gravity pinning him against the ladder as his magboots struggled to gain purchase on the rungs. He reached the bottom deck of the Orion and opened the emergency bulkhead to the antimatter pod storage compartment.

He surveyed the massive room, which was now little more than a series of empty pod frames and twisted duranium hull plating. He looked away as a flash of lightning forked past outside the ripped-open hull, and held on to the door frame as a clap of thunder knocked him backward. He caught his breath, closed the bulkhead, and keyed his comm.

"Duffy to Gomez."

"Go ahead."

"I have a new theory on what tore open the belly of the Orion. All her antimatter pods have been ejected."

"They lost containment and tried to eject the pods—"

"—but the ejection system was made for zero-G vacuum and the pods failed to reach safe distance before they exploded. Man, what a mess."

"So, no chance of restoring power?"

"Negative. Once her batteries go, her integrity field'll collapse and this'll become the biggest hunk of duranium origami you ever saw."

"Okay, come back up and start working your way forward to help me finish scanning for survivors. We'll meet back at the starboard hatch on deck three."

"See you there. Duffy out."

Duffy trudged back toward the access ladder. He remembered how arduous the climb down had been, and he looked back up the ladder to his destination, seventeen decks away.

Damn, Sonnie. . .the things I do to keep a date with you. With aching shoulders and a growling stomach, he started climbing.

Chapter

7

Corsi felt her way through the Orion's forward torpedo room, inching toward the launcher assembly, where her tricorder indicated the Wildfire device rested on a loading rail. She searched the area with her palm beacon, struggling to discern the narrow, conical shape of the device from the wreckage of the

collapsed ceilings and flooring. Then the beam of her palm beacon fell upon the tip of the device, which lay half-buried in a tangle of optical fibers.

Corsi tried to pull the fibers off the device. They resisted, caught fast on something underneath—a protrusion from the warhead casing, she surmised—and she tugged harder. Like kelp tearing away from the hull of a sunken ship, the cables came free, and she tossed them aside. As the trailing ends of the cables passed behind her, she saw that they had been tangled up in the corpse of one of the Orion's crew, the skeleton of a male Andorian, whom she guessed was probably Lieutenant ch'Kelavar, the Orion's second officer.

She scanned the Wildfire device and saw her tricorder was receiving no readings from it whatsoever—and remembered that the device was heavily shielded. She slowly ran her hand along its surface, feeling for its control panel. A few seconds later, she discovered the slight indentation in the device's casing and pressed down. The surface of the device suddenly was wrapped in a shimmering, holographic cocoon, and through her helmet visor she could barely hear the standard, feminine Starfleet computer voice, heavily distorted by the dense, semiliquid gases that filled the compartment. The image of a standard interface panel formed on the outside of the device's holographic shell. "Verify security clearance."

Gold's orders had been to give the device's top-secret access codes to as few people as possible; for this away mission he had entrusted them only to Corsi. Corsi entered the project's specific code sequence, followed by her personal authorization.

"Verified."

The hologram changed again; now it displayed vast amounts of data, including the device's current depth in the atmosphere, its target depth, its countdown preset and its operational status—which, Corsi grimly noted, clearly indicated it was armed. She keyed her comm.

"Corsi to Gomez. I've located the device."

"Status?"

"Active. If it drops to its target depth, it'll start its countdown automatically."

"How long until—" The comm crackled with static, swallowing Gomez's reply. Corsi tapped the side of her helmet, mostly out of frustration. The static persisted, with a few stray words slipping through intermittently: "—device...return to—" Then Corsi's comm spat out a long burst of static.

"Commander? Your signal is breaking up. Please repeat. Commander, do you copy? Commander, do you—"

The static turned to silence, and Corsi paused as the room quickly grew darker. Her palm beacon dimmed rapidly, as did the small indicator lights on her pressure suit. She reflexively looked to her tricorder, only to find it had lost power, as well. Within seconds, the compartment was swallowed by darkness, and the only sound she could hear was her own breathing, ragged and loud inside her helmet.

She knew she was respirating too quickly. Remain calm, she thought. She concentrated on controlling each breath, keeping her lungs' ebb and flow slow and even. Probably just an ionic disturbance in the atmosphere. It'll pass in a few seconds, just stay calm.

Slowly, a violet glow of light returned and suffused the cramped compartment. There, no problem, just a simple—

She looked down and saw her palm beacon and tricorder were both still without power. Then she noticed her shadow stretching slowly across the Wildfire device. The light was coming from behind her, and it was getting brighter.

With great caution, she turned toward the light.

* * *

Stevens reached the aft end of the Orion's secondary hull, looked up at the underside of the starboard nacelle, and shook his head in disappointment as he keyed the comm. "Starboard nacelle's got multiple fractures where it meets the engineering section," he said. "Any luck on port side?"

"Negative," P8 Blue said. "Massive damage along the entire port nacelle assembly. I do not think this will work."

"Want to do one more sweep forward before we—"

"Gomez to Work Bugs. We've lost contact with Corsi. Can you confirm all channels clear?"

Stevens tried not to think of worst-case scenarios while he checked his Work Bug's comm relay circuits. Because the Orion's main computers were offline, the away team's communications were boosted through the Work Bugs' onboard systems.

"Bug Two, all channels clear."

"Work Bug One, all channels clear."

"All right. I need visual confirmation that the forward torpedo compartment is still intact."

"On our way," Stevens said.

"Acknowledged," P8 Blue said. "Reversing heading now."

Stevens could just barely see Work Bug One, up above the Orion, as he rotated Work Bug Two for the return trip along the Orion's underside. As he completed his rotation maneuver, he saw an incandescent, narrow double helix of energy that emerged from the deepest layers of the atmosphere and extended upward, disappearing into the underside of the Orion's saucer section.

"Pattie, do you see that?"

"Affirmative."

"Stevens, report," Gomez ordered.

"Some kind of energy beam, Commander. Coming up from the planet and penetrating the ship's saucer."

"I am unable to lock scanners onto the phenomenon," P8 Blue added, "but it appears to be entering the

Orion's hull directly beneath the forward torpedo compartment.”

“Gomez to all away team personnel. Corsi might be in trouble. Who's closest to the forward torpedo compartment?”

“This is Duffy. I'm on deck five, section twelve. I can reach her in two minutes.”

“I'll meet you there,” Gomez said through the increasing static on the comm. “Everyone else, get to the emergency rendezvous point. Stevens, tell the da Vinci we might need to abort.”

“Acknowledged.” Stevens stared at the shimmering ribbon of light piercing the Orion's hull, thought of Domenica Corsi being on the receiving end of it, and again tried not to imagine the worst as he activated his Work Bug's emergency channel. “Stevens toda Vinci, priority one.”

* * *

Corsi stared in awe as the lattice of light emerged from the floor, creeping upward like a vine ascending an invisible wall. Each tendril was made of small beams of energy, some only a few centimeters long while others stretched vertically for more than a meter. Every beam was either parallel or perpendicular to another beam, and they built upon each other, new tendrils of light appearing through the floor, pushing the ones above upward, like a twisting ladder. It extended through the bulkheads on either side of the torpedo room, and was several meters deep from Corsi's point of view—which meant it was blocking her only avenue of escape.

The structure stopped moving upward and began growing outward, toward Corsi. She backed away from it, but after a few steps she had no more room to retreat. The wall of light pushed in and enveloped her.

She convulsed violently as an electrical shock coursed through her nervous system. Her fingers curled into a rictus, and a metallic taste filled her mouth as her teeth clenched with enough force to crack their enamel. Her face twisted into an excruciating, death's head grin.

She struggled to keep her grip on consciousness. I won't go out like this! The nausea was overwhelming. Her skin felt like it was on fire. Can't panic, can't panic, can't panic, can't panic....

She became dizzy, then thought she might be floating, but since she couldn't feel her feet she couldn't be sure. The edges of her vision began to fade and push inward, and she felt herself sinking into the comfort of oblivion.

No! Fight, damn it! Fight!

The tunnel bordering her vision grew longer with each moment, and her desperate inner voice felt small and impotent against the promise of darkness.

Not like this...not like—

* * *

Gold strained to see the double helix of light through the constantly shifting wash of static that dominated the da Vinci's main viewer. “Ina, can you clean that up?”

“Filters are at maximum, sir,” Ina said.

“McAllan, what are we looking at here? Is that beam coming from a weapon?”

The tactical officer studied his console and frowned at the lack of information it offered him. “Not sure, sir. The beam is absorbing all our scans, and we can’t look deep enough into the atmosphere to find its source.”

“I’m going to need more than that to—” Gold stopped as the main viewer showed the mysterious tendrils of energy dim and fade away beneath the Orion, vanishing like a phantom into the swirling hydrogen mists. “That’s either very, very good,” Gold thought aloud, “or very, very bad.”

* * *

Duffy slogged down the flooded corridor at the fastest pace he could manage, his muscles burning with fatigue as he forced himself forward through the thick semifluid hydrogen. His hot, ragged breaths fogged the transparent aluminum faceplate of his helmet as he stumbled across the walls and ceiling, and broke his constant, sideways falling with his arms while the ship rolled slowly around him. To move more quickly, he had reduced the settings of his magnetic boots to the minimum he needed to keep his footing, and he had decided that whatever the planet’s gravity said was “down” was fine by him.

He reached the intersection closest to the forward torpedo compartment at the same time as Gomez, who had adopted the same tactic for moving through the corridors. He fell into step behind her as they approached the open door to the torpedo room. It was still open, and the compartment beyond was completely dark. Gomez and Duffy moved quickly inside, the beams of their palm beacons crisscrossing in the reddish amber murk.

Gomez gestured with her tricorder toward the back of the room. “Back there,” she said, her voice echoing inside Duffy’s helmet. Corsi was slumped in a sitting position against the far wall. Duffy shone his search beam into Corsi’s face. The blond security chief was unconscious. Gomez continued scanning with her tricorder. “She’s alive—barely. Let’s get her out of here.”

Duffy and Gomez each grabbed one of Corsi’s arms, pulled her to a standing position, and began pulling her toward the corridor. “Gomez to Stevens, report.”

“I’m docked at the rendezvous point,” Stevens said. “Soloman’s aboard and Pattie’s standing by to dock Bug One as soon as I’m clear.”

“Tell Soloman to take Bug One with Duffy. You’ll be bringing Corsi and me back toda Vinci.”

* * *

Work Bug Two bobbed and rolled violently as it sped toward the Vinci, now less than a kilometer away. Stevens was making no effort to fly smoothly or gracefully—just as quickly as the Work Bug’s engines and the planet’s atmospheric turbulence would allow. Forks of neon green lightning sliced past the cockpit windshield, but Stevens’s only fear right now was time—or, more precisely, how little of it Domenica might have left unless she reached the Vinci sickbay.

A violent upswell spun the Work Bug nearly two full rotations around its forward axis, its thrusters screeching as Stevens fought to regain control. The utility craft had barely recovered its heading before Stevens once again pushed the thrusters to full-forward.

“Stevens, go easy,” Gomez said. She was kneeling over Corsi, doing what little she could with a first aid kit to help the fallen security chief, who was in deep shock—or worse.

No, not worse, Stevens told himself. She’ll be okay. Just keep going. Just get there. “I’m all right, Commander,” he said, not believing it at all.

Through the swirling haze Stevens recognized the familiar shape of the da Vinci, less than four hundred meters away.

With a little luck, I can have us in the shuttle bay in ninety seconds. He stole a quick look back at Corsi, whose porcelain-smooth skin had become terrifyingly pale. He hoped that for her the next ninety seconds wouldn’t equal a lifetime.

Chapter 8

She suffered a severe neuroelectric shock,” Lense said, looking away from the diagnostic screen to face Gold and Gomez, who stood on the other side of the biobed, eyes fixed on Corsi, who lay unconscious. “Her central nervous system was badly disrupted, and there was damage in her prefrontal lobe and motor cortex. I’ve repaired most of the major problems, but she’s still comatose.”

“For how long?” Gold said.

“Hours. Days. Maybe the rest of her life.”

Gold shook his head, unable to find words for his dismay.

“Can you tell if this was caused by a natural phenomenon or a weapon?” Gomez asked. Lense shook her head.

“Hard to say. There was no specific point of impact, so I’d say it wasn’t a directed attack. But I really can’t rule out any possibility.”

Gold glanced at Lense. “Let me know the moment anything changes,” he said, gesturing toward Corsi.

Lense nodded. “Of course.”

Gomez stayed at Gold’s shoulder as he took a few steps away from the biobed, then paused. “Bring the rest of the away team to observation in ten minutes,” he said quietly.

“Aye, sir.” Gomez exited quickly. Gold lingered in sickbay for a moment, then moved toward the door. He stepped into the corridor, then looked back. He watched silently as Lense stood over her patient and gently stroked a wayward lock of blond hair from Corsi’s temple.

The sickbay door slid shut, and Gold found himself alone in the corridor. If Corsi didn’t make it, she would not be the first person to die in the line of duty under his command. But bitter experience had taught him that each loss affected him differently—especially when it was someone he considered a friend.

* * *

Stevens was the last member of the away team to reach the briefing room. “Sorry I’m late,” he said, his voice quavering with what Gold surmised was suppressed worry over Corsi. “I just stopped in sickbay to—”

“Stevens,” Gold said in a tone of voice that was deliberately gruff, “what’s the Orion’s status? When can we pull her out of here?” The verbal slap seemed to have the effect Gold had sought. With effort, Stevens regained his composure and looked his captain in the eye.

“She’s got severe structural damage at most of her major stress points, sir,” Stevens said. “The engineering section is completely compromised, and the primary hull has enough damage that if we try to attach towing lines, she’ll just rip in half.”

Gold turned his gaze toward P8. “You would agree?”

P8 uttered a brief series of clicking noises. “Yes, Captain,” P8 said. “Stevens is correct. We will not be able to tow the Orion using duranium cables.”

“What about this light you and Stevens encountered? How did it disrupt power and comms?”

“Unknown. We were unable to scan the phenomenon,” P8 said.

“We need to know if it was a natural event,” Gold said. “It could just be an atmospheric effect caused by the Wildfire device. But if it’s a weapon. . . . Did it show any sign of intelligent control?”

Stevens and P8 looked at each other. Stevens shook his head, and P8 waved two sets of arms in a gesture equivalent to a humanoid shrug. “We really can’t be sure, sir,” Stevens said.

“Can you tell me anything about it? Anything definite?”

“It was bright,” P8 said.

Gold frowned, then aimed his furrowed brow at Soloman. “Were you able to recover the Orion’s logs?”

“Not all of them,” Soloman said. “I downloaded the flight data and most of the primary sensor logs. The mission was aborted before I could copy the crew’s official and personal logs, which you indicated were low-priority.”

“I understand,” Gold said. “Good work. Have McAllan start analyzing them as soon as possible.”

“He’s already started, sir.”

“Since we can’t tow the Orion back to orbit, our only priority now is to recover the Wildfire device,” Gold said to everyone as he activated the monitor on the wall behind his chair. It showed a map of the planet’s atmospheric currents. An ominous patch of shifting reds and oranges, indicating violent thermal disturbances, lay ahead of the *Vinci*’s projected course.

“We don’t have much time,” Gold said. “We and the Orion are being pulled toward some nasty weather that leads down to the deepest layers of the atmosphere. Orion probably won’t survive the trip. We have

about thirty minutes to go over there, get the warhead, and get back. Blue, you'll be flying Duffy back to the Orion. Bring him back safely, please."

"Aye, sir."

"Duffy, stay behind a moment. Everyone else, dismissed." Gold and Duffy waited while the rest of the group filed out of the briefing room.

Gold handed a padd to Duffy. "These are the security codes for the Wildfire device. Don't reveal them to anyone."

Duffy stared at the padd and scrutinized the codes. "Fairly standard," Duffy said matter-of-factly. Gold regarded the young officer with a grave expression.

"Duffy, before Corsi's transmission was cut off, she told Gomez she believed the device had been armed. If that's true, you'll need all sixteen of those codes to shut it down."

"No problem."

"I don't want any heroics from you, Duffy. If you don't think you can shut it down before Orion hits the vortex, get out of there. Once the device hits detonation depth, we'll have less than three hours to get out of orbit."

How long will it take the device to reach detonation depth?"

"What, I'm a fortune-teller? Depending on the size of the thermal vortex, it might reach the core in an hour, a day, or never. But if you're aboard the Orion when it takes that ride, it'll be a one-way ticket. Understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good. Get down to the shuttle bay and suit up. You have three minutes." Duffy followed Gold out the door into the corridor, where they turned in opposite directions. Duffy stopped Gold with a question.

"Why me, sir?"

"Excuse me?" Gold said, turning to face him.

"Why did you pick me for this mission?"

"Your experience with protomatter-based systems and your ability to perform well under pressure."

"Oh," Duffy said, a bit embarrassed. "I thought you were going to say 'Why not.'"

Gold nodded and answered over his shoulder as he walked away. "That was my other answer. Two minutes and thirty seconds, Duffy. Don't be late."

Chapter 9

The thermal eruptions around Work Bug One were becoming more frequent and more powerful with each passing minute, and P8 Blue was using four of her limbs to hold herself steady as the industrial utility craft shivered from each massive thunderclap. The buffeting currents were threatening to shear Bug One away from the Orion's forward starboard docking port, whose interlocking metal rings screeched in protest as their limits were repeatedly tested.

P8 made yet another adjustment to the Work Bug's null-field settings, hoping she could minimize the effects of the turbulence and the volume of the thunder that followed each slashing bolt of lightning. The immense, green electrical discharges were also becoming more intense, and now were arcing around the Orion in a nearly constant, blinding macabre dance.

The Nasat engineer wished she could simply pull her appendages inward and roll into her defensive posture, but if she did she would be unable to watch the console and monitor Duffy's vital signs, which currently appeared to be normal and steady. P8 noted the timer counting down the minutes and seconds remaining before Orion intersected the thermal vortex that lay ahead, and she keyed the comm switch. "Bug One to Duffy. Fourteen minutes, Commander."

Several seconds passed with no reply. P8 checked Duffy's vital signs, which still appeared normal. She was about to repeat her transmission when his voice crackled weakly over the staticky channel.

"I know," Duffy said. "Stand by."

P8 let out a few worried clicks as she listened to the grinding of metal against metal coming from the docking port. She was a structural engineer by training and knew that what she was hearing was a very bad sound. Stand by, she thought cynically. Easy for him to say.

* * *

Every muscle in Duffy's body felt like it was being tied into a knot as he strained to separate the control cone of the Wildfire device from its protomatter payload. Duffy had ascertained the device was in the final stages of pre-launch when disaster struck the Orion, which meant the device was fully armed. The only way to disarm it now was to separate its trigger from the protomatter that would fuel the artificial stellar ignition.

The first twelve steps had been easy for Duffy. He simply followed the codes Gold had given him, entering them in sequence into the device's holographic interface. But now, four steps away from finishing the procedure, his progress had come to a halt over a simple lack of leverage.

The device rested on the loading rail into the firing tube, which was at roughly chest height for Duffy. Between the height of the loading rail, the proliferation of debris cluttering the small compartment, and the fact that without main power the device would have to be decoupled and taken off the rail manually, Duffy was in a difficult position.

He adjusted the settings of his magboots and half-walked, half-pulled himself up the wall where the loading rail entered the firing tube. Then he took two careful steps, placing one foot on each side of the metallic rail, and began slowly shuffling toward the device. Within a few seconds, he had managed to seat himself on top of the warhead trigger and, with enormous effort, bent his leg farther than he thought anatomically possible and braced his foot against the front edge of the protomatter payload casing. Gripping the edge of the warhead with both hands, he began to push with his foot.

Duffy held his breath and exerted himself with a migraine-inducing grunt. He felt a wave of pain start in his groin and extend into his temples. He tried to use the pain to his advantage, as a focus for his efforts. Come on, dammit! Shake loose before I hurt something important.

His grunt evolved into a shout of agony and frustration as his first attempt failed. His breath burst from his lungs, and he gasped quickly, determined to try again as soon as the red spots swimming in his vision faded a bit. He blinked once and noted the countdown on his helmet's visor display. He had eleven minutes to get this warhead off the Orion before it got sucked down a one-way turbolift to hell.

He drew in a deep breath and felt the tension coiling in his gut as he braced his foot for a second go. Another grunt welled up from somewhere just below his diaphragm. He suppressed his fatigue and pain as he struggled against what he was quickly coming to think of as "the immovable object."

His left foot slipped off the edge of the device. He lost his balance and tumbled backward off the rail, flailing in a slow-motion descent through the dense hydrogen murk, onto the detritus-strewn deck.

Shaking off the fall, he swept the beam of his palm beacon through the compartment. The narrow band of polarized light revealed a grim tableau of skeletons entangled in ODN cables, ruptured bulkheads, and dormant consoles. Then he saw something, half-buried, that might prove useful. He scrambled on all fours over to the corner of the room, and pulled a narrow piece of broken duranium hull plating from beneath a pile of fiber-optic wires. The metal was roughly a meter and a half long, and just over two centimeters thick—an ideal lever.

Duffy carried his new, makeshift tool over to the Wildfire device, his confidence bolstered. Time for a rematch, he thought. He wedged the lever between the warhead and its payload and summoned his irresistible force for another round versus the immovable object.

* * *

The mood on the da Vinci bridge was tense but subdued. On the main viewer, the Orion was barely visible through the swirling currents and increasingly violent lightning storm, and the muted rumble of thunder had swelled into an ominous, near-constant presence, like the hammer of a titan beating the da Vinci in an irregular tempo.

Gold walked slowly around the perimeter of the bridge, past several dimmed consoles. Every nonessential system had already been taken offline to add power to the da Vinci's structural integrity field, yet the hull continued to moan from the immense pressure of the gas giant's atmosphere. He noted that some of the bridge officers seemed unfazed by the tumult—Ina and McAllan both maintained a coolly professional demeanor—while others, such as Soloman and Wong, seemed now to be wishing they had never joined Starfleet in the first place.

Gold joined Gomez and McAllan at the tactical console. Gold saw McAllan had divided his display into two equal halves. On the left he was reviewing the Orion's flight data from the moments before its disastrous power loss; on the right he was monitoring the current status of Work Bug One and the structural integrity of the Orion, as well as keeping an eye on the countdown to the Steamrunner-class ship's impending descent into the planet's core.

"Any theories yet?" Gold said, careful to keep his voice down. McAllan remained focused on the changing screens of data from the Orion's flight recorder.

"I don't think you'll like it," McAllan said quietly.

“Try me,” Gold said.

McAllan tapped a few commands into his console and showed the captain a series of reports generated by probes sent into Galvan VI. “The S.C.E. surveyed this planet sixteen times over three years to prepare for the Wildfire test. None of the probes encountered anything like the energy-dampening field that crippled the Orion.” McAllan presented a few more screens of information. “They scanned the planet’s thermal layers down to nearly forty-five thousand kilometers. The S.C.E. computer-modeled most of the rest.”

Gomez studied the thermal-imaging scans, then shook her head. “Looks like they got it wrong. These convection patterns shouldn’t be possible in a planet this size.”

“That’s what the Wildfire project leader said.” McAllan called up a written status report. “That’s why the S.C.E. retrofitted Orion with a specialized active tachyon scanning system. Their orders were to map the planet core, feed the data to the device, and send it on its merry way.”

Gold could already see where McAllan was headed. “You think there’s a connection between the scans of the planet’s core and the attack on the Orion?”

“There was no sign of this phenomenon before Orion shot those tachyon pulses down there,” McAllan said. “It appears to be localized around the Orion, and it seems to be drawn to the Wildfire device—which just happens to be the one thing that might completely obliterate this planet. If you ask me, Captain, I’d say this looks like self-defense.”

Gold nodded. “You may be right,” he said. “In which case, the sooner we get the device out of the atmosphere the better—”

Theda Vinci heaved violently upward, then rolled quickly to port as the ship’s inertial dampeners reset themselves. The impact knocked Gomez halfway over the railing that circled the upper deck of the bridge. McAllan landed hard on the floor, along with Gold and most of the rest of the bridge crew. Ina and Wong clung to their consoles as Gold struggled back to his feet.

“Report!” Gold shouted over the howling din.

“Thermal upswell, sir,” Wong said. “We took a direct hit.”

“Damage report,” Gold said as he stumbled across the pitching deck and landed with a grunt against his chair.

Ina scanned the alerts quickly appearing on her console. “Plasma leaks in starboard warp nacelle...shield generator three overloaded...ventral-side hull damage near the aft impulse reactor.”

“Casualties?”

“Minor injuries in engineering—scrapes and burns.”

Breathing a cautious sigh of relief, Gold said, “Wong, keep an eye out for those upswells.”

“Aye, sir,” the young helmsman said.

Gold squinted at the main viewer, as if that would help him pierce the curtain of static flurrying across it. He could feel it in his fingertips and in the soles of his feet—his ship, trembling beneath him, its every shudder an echo of the violence surrounding it in this nightmarish place.

Every instinct Gold possessed told him to abandon the Orion and take his ship back to the placid vacuum of space. But he had his orders, and he thought of Duffy and Blue, whom he had sent into that maelstrom. He wasn't leaving until they were safely back on the da Vinci.

A nova-bright flash of light flared on the main viewer. Gold lifted a hand to shield his eyes, and the rest of the bridge crew followed suit. A second later, the flare dimmed.

“Magnify,” Gold ordered.

Ina adjusted the main viewer, which still showed only overlapping lines of zigzagging interference. Within seconds details returned, and Gold's mouth felt painfully dry as he saw the glowing, smoldering gash that a bolt of lightning had just sliced across the Orion's forward hull.

He glanced over his shoulder at Gomez, who was staring anxiously at the main viewer, then looked at McAllan.

“That's it,” Gold said to McAllan. “Get them out of there.”

* * *

What happened? Where am I?

Duffy reached toward his face, tried to rub his eyes—only to find the faceplate of his Starfleet pressure suit in the way.

Pressure suit. I'm in a... I'm on the floor.

Duffy felt the tremendous pressure of the semifluid hydrogen that filled the ship crushing down on him. He lay on his back, legs splayed apart, rumped like dirty laundry over the wreckage on the deck. He licked his lips, which were dry, cracked, and bleeding. The sharp sting of saliva in the tender wounds helped him edge closer to consciousness.

He keyed the switch for his palm beacon. The beam sliced through the haze as he began to notice a terrible, erratic throbbing that felt like either a headache or his heart pounding its way out of his chest.

The beacon's intense, bluish beam fell upon a metal bar fused to what looked like a modified photon torpedo casing. The bar was probably close to two meters long, but it was twisted—melted?—into an Sshape. Above and beyond the misshapen metal bar, large sections of the bulkhead were blasted apart, glowing white-hot and smoldering.

Not a headache...not my heart. That's...thunder. That's thunder.

A crackling noise filled Duffy's ears, which were ringing and felt like they were packed with wax. The sound was just a faraway scratch of electronic spatters at first, then he was able to discern words. “Duffy, do...read...—bort...Please resp...Blue to Duff—”

His confusion began to clear, and clarity returned in waves. The Orion. I'm on the... I'm retrieving the

device. Wildfire device. It's armed...I...I need to get up.

He keyed his comm and increased the gain on the transceiver. "Duffy to Blue. I'm okay, I think."

P8 responded through the yowling, high-frequency signal disruptions, which were quickly growing worse. "Get back to the Bug. Gold's orders are to abort. We have four minutes to get back to da Vinci."

Duffy looked up at the metal bar, conjoined to the Wildfire device's outer casing at the molecular level, and was suddenly grateful he hadn't become part of that impromptu sculpture. He grabbed onto a piece of bulkhead jutting out from the wall and pulled himself to his feet. "Get ready to fly," Duffy said. "I'm on my way."

"Be careful, sir," P8 said.

Duffy fought to overcome an attack of vertigo as he lifted his foot over a lightning-cut, half-molten gap in the wall that was now the only exit from the compartment. "A bit late for that, Blue," Duffy said.

Setting his magboots to minimum grip, he broke into a clumsy walk-jog through the rolling, mangled, smoking corridors of the Orion. He hoped Pattie and the Work Bug would both still be there when he arrived.

* * *

"More power to stabilizers!" Gold shouted. "Keep her steady, Wong!"

At the helm, the young ensign struggled to comply, but the turbulence around the tiny starship had grown more violent. Another blast of superheated, superdense gas erupted beneath the ship, which listed sharply to starboard. The roar of the storm outside the vessel had become overpowering, and the bridge lights flickered erratically.

Gomez looked up from the damage reports that were flooding in from engineering and glanced at the main viewscreen. The small, vulnerable-looking Work Bug was fighting its way through the fiery maelstrom, back to the da Vinci, but the constantly shifting currents tumbled the tiny craft end over end, spinning it in all directions, trapping it halfway between the two starships. Come on, Gomez thought as she watched the Work Bug struggle forward. Another half-kilometer, you can make it.

A massive, spinning pillar of liquid-metal hydrogen—fresh from the planet's core—formed between two enormous cloud layers and grabbed the Work Bug, pulling it in quickly shrinking circles toward what Gomez realized would be almost certain destruction. She thought of Kieran, trapped inside the small craft, and felt a chill wash through her as she watched Bug One accelerate toward its doom.

"Wong," Gold said, "Take us in fast. Angle the shuttle bay doors toward the Bug and try to disrupt that twister."

The conn officer set the da Vinci on a course directly into the swirling column of scorching, liquid-metal hydrogen.

"McAllan," Gold said as the spinning wall of semifluid fire grew large on the main viewer, "tell them the cavalry's coming."

* * *

The view outside the Work Bug's cockpit window was a blurry wash of moving colors, and Duffy—pinned to the port bulkhead by the centrifugal force of their inward spiral—felt extremely dizzy. He gasped for breath after his second round of painful dry heaves, and was suddenly very glad he had missed two meals in a row today. He was barely able to hear P8 over the deafening cacophony of thunder crashing in an unbroken chorus around the craft. He tapped in front of his ear, which P8 understood meant he wanted her to repeat herself. She spoke slowly, with overly perfect diction.

“Theda Vinci is coming to get us,” she said, fighting to regain helm control. Duffy, with great effort, nodded once. He could no longer turn his head far enough to see what she was doing at the controls; all he could do was relax and remain stuck against the inner hull of the Work Bug, waiting either for death or a Starfleet-issued miracle. There isn't a damn thing I can do now, he thought. This could all be over in a few seconds... I might never see Sonnie again.

Duffy was hurled from the port bulkhead. He slammed hard into the starboard airlock door before rolling ass-over-elbows toward the front of the Work Bug. Before he could ask P8 what was happening, a jarring collision knocked him backward, then upward—which was now downward—onto the Work Bug's ceiling, and he heard a sound that on any other day would have made him cringe, but right now was sweeter than a Trill lullaby: the high-pitched scrape of duranium on duranium. Duffy rolled onto his stomach, blinked, and realized P8 had made a textbook-perfect, upside-down, backward-facing crash-landing in the Theda Vinci shuttle bay.

“Good landing,” Duffy said without a hint of irony.

“Thank you,” P8 said.

Duffy reached up to help P8 out of her pilot's seat harness. Outside the cockpit windshield, beyond the shuttle bay entrance's crackling, overtaxed protective force field, he could barely see the shape of the Orion, ringed by lightning, roughly a kilometer away. He keyed his comm circuit and was about to hail the bridge when the Orion suddenly was silhouetted by an incandescent flash from a huge, explosive thermal upswell. Duffy squinted hard and lifted his arm to block the glare.

P8 let out a panicked string of high-frequency clicks.

Duffy lowered his arm to see the Orion flying like a target out of Gre'thor, directly toward the Theda Vinci.

* * *

It all happened in three-point-five seconds.

Everyone on the Theda Vinci bridge saw the flash on the main viewer, the eruption directly behind the Orion that sent the Steamrunner-class starship speeding toward them.

McAllan reacted first. “Collision alarm!” he shouted, sounding the shipwide alert klaxon as he did so.

“Evasive!” Gold ordered. To Gold, the moment seemed trapped in amber. Wong entered commands at the helm, but he seemed to move in slow motion, as did the Orion, rolling toward them through the swirling mists like a blazing wheel.

“Brace for impact!” Gold ordered. The burning husk of the Orion filled the main viewer. Gold grabbed the arms of his chair and focused on the rising whine of the Theda Vinci's impulse engines, which strained

against the planet's crushing gravity and dense, smothering atmosphere.

The image on the main viewer shifted, but not quickly enough. Gold felt it before it happened. This is what it feels like when your luck runs out, he thought.

The Orion smashed like a hammer into the *da Vinci*.

Chapter 10

The moment of impact was the most terrible thing Gold had ever heard; he could swear the *da Vinci* howled in pain as the Orion's primary hull rammed into its underside. The tremor from the collision flung him from his seat, and the echoing boom sent a stabbing pain through his eardrums. The rest of the bridge crew seemed to be tumbling in slow motion through the air, caught in the strobing flicker of the malfunctioning main viewscreen and stuttering overhead lights.

He hit the deck hard, on his back, his breath knocked out of him. Fighting to inhale, he pulled himself back toward his chair. To his right he saw Gomez, clinging to the railing and shouting orders over the sound and fury of explosions and alarm klaxons. "Damage report!" she said, sleeveing a broad smear of blood from her forehead to reveal a jagged cut that immediately resumed bleeding.

"Comms are down," Ina said, her voice betraying the first signs of panic. "Sensors are offline, we're losing power—"

Another explosion rocked the *da Vinci*. Gold felt the deck heave and lurch, and he knew another thermal upswell had pummeled his ship. He fell hard against his seat as the bridge lights flickered out, and the only illumination came from the exploding science console to his left.

Then he saw McAllan moving through the air toward him.

At first Gold thought an explosion had tossed McAllan forward, but then he realized the tactical officer was intentionally vaulting over his console, directly at him, one arm outstretched. McAllan's hand slammed into Gold's shoulder, knocking the captain off his feet. As Gold fell he saw the bridge ceiling's central support hub—which was located directly above the captain's chair—collapsing down in a heap of twisted duranium. Gold, still unable to breathe, lay paralyzed as the wreckage crushed his tactical officer—and his own left hand.

At first, Gold felt nothing from his hand, which he knew must have been pulverized. Then agonizing pain shot up his arm. He would have screamed, but his lungs continued to resist his attempts at breathing.

The bridge was in chaos, filling with panicked voices and billowing smoke, but to Gold, who was rapidly growing weaker, it all seemed light-years away—unreal, like a bad dream or a holodeck illusion.

He summoned a mental image of his wife, Rachel. She had always said his impatience would be the death of him. Guess you were right, sweetheart, he thought, as consciousness slipped from his grasp. Forgive me.

* * *

The impact of the Orion's collision with the Vinci had knocked Work Bug One onto its starboard side, placing its hatch on the floor. As the shuttle bay began to collapse around it, Duffy decided that having only one exit hatch from the utility craft definitely qualified as a design flaw.

The view beyond the force field was spinning wildly, which he realized meant the Vinci was out of control. They had to get out of the shuttle bay now. "Fire starboard thrusters!" Duffy said as the shuttle bay's force field began to collapse.

"The navigational thrusters aren't designed to—"

"That's an order!"

P8 keyed the thrusters as a second jolt pummeled the Vinci, lifting the Work Bug half a meter off the deck. The combined force of the impact and the thrusters rolled the small craft wildly toward the side wall of the shuttle bay. Duffy tumbled inside the rear of the vehicle like a specimen in a centrifuge, cursing as he banged roughly off every solid surface. The Work Bug struck the wall with a hollow thud and came to a stop resting right side up.

Duffy shouldered open the battered hatch and looked back to make certain P8 was with him. Taking advantage of her specially designed EVA gear, she curled herself into a ball and rolled quickly across the floor to the aft-corridor exit. She forced the sliding door open while Duffy sprinted to the shuttle bay's auxiliary control panel. He tapped at the sparking console for a few seconds, trying to reinforce the collapsing force field or close the outer shuttle bay doors, but the system was in near-total failure. He gave up and followed P8 out of the shuttle bay.

The shuttle bay force field collapsed as Duffy reached for the exit's manual closing lever. The rushing wall of superdense, semiliquid gases pushed a shock wave of compressed air ahead of it that knocked Duffy backward, away from the lever, and lifted the abandoned Work Bug and tossed it forward like a toy in a tornado. P8 grasped the lever and yanked it with four arms. The door slid closed as the corridor rang with the sound of the Work Bug striking the shuttle bay's aft wall.

* * *

Chief Engineer Jil Barnak shielded his face with his arms as he dodged through the flames that were spreading rapidly through main engineering. He checked the antimatter containment field and was relieved to find it intact, which, he mused cynically, made it unique among the ship's systems at the moment.

The warp core had gone offline at the moment of impact. Main power had failed almost instantly. Consoles all throughout main engineering had exploded and were now belching columns of acrid black smoke. But his engineers were still at their posts.

"Orthak!" Barnak shouted over the blaring alarms. "Get your flippers over here and shut down the EPS taps, we're venting plasma! O'Leary, transfer impulse power to the—"

A second explosion rocked the ship, knocking the gray-haired Atrean chief engineer off his feet. The smoke was now too heavy to see through, and Barnak choked and coughed as it burned his lungs. He reached for a breathing mask and drew in a few desperately needed breaths of clean air. He turned to finish his order to O'Leary, only to discover the man was now dead, a jagged piece of shrapnel wedged in the back of his skull.

Then Barnak saw the fracture in the matter-anti-matter reaction assembly.

The other engineers—those who were still standing—were shouting overlapping damage reports and asking Barnak for his orders, but he had stopped listening. He had to make a critical decision in the next five seconds. He had two options.

He could attempt an emergency shutdown of the warp core, and hope the contents of the reaction assembly could be expelled before that ten-centimeter-long fracture exploded. Purging the core could take up to eleven seconds, and it might take days to repair the fracture. But if he gambled wrong, if the fracture ruptured before he purged the antimatter from the reaction assembly, the resulting explosion would vaporize the *Vinci*.

He could eject the warp core, guaranteeing the short-term safety of the ship, but leaving them without warp power until they could be towed back to a starbase. The actual ejection of the core would take only a fraction of a second—but evacuating main engineering with the turbolifts offline would take more than thirty seconds. Barnak was certain the reaction assembly wouldn't last thirty seconds. It might not last ten.

He keyed the safety override and initiated the emergency core-ejection. He knew it was the right decision; his only regret was that he had no time to tell his engineers what was about to happen.

He wondered if his wife would be waiting for him in the afterlife. When he was a young man, his wife, Sindea, had passed away of a sudden illness a few months after they were married. That was more than forty years ago. He had never remarried, choosing instead a solitary life in the service of Starfleet.

A quickly rising hum was all that preceded the electromagnetically propelled ejection of the *Vinci*'s warp core, which shot down and out of the main engineering compartment in a blur, exiting the ship in a hundredth of a second. The vacuum created by its departure tore the breathable air from main engineering, and pulled Jil Barnak and seven of his engineers out into the atmosphere of Galvan VI, less than four seconds before the warp core exploded.

* * *

“Get that force field up!” Stevens said, pointing the beam from his pressure suit's wrist beacon past Faulwell, toward the door to the forward sensor control room. Faulwell, also suited up for the worst, was straining to pull the manual-release lever for the emergency bulkhead in the middle of the corridor.

“I can't,” Faulwell said through teeth gritted with effort. “Internal force fields are offline.” Stevens cursed under his breath. Without the force fields, they would have to manually close the emergency bulkheads to seal off compromised areas of the ship. He sprinted across the trembling deck to Faulwell's side, grabbed hold of the release lever and pulled. The lever came free, and both men gingerly stepped clear of the quickly closing, twenty-centimeter-thick door.

“C'mon,” Stevens said. “We have to get down to deck four.” Faulwell followed Stevens, who, although an enlisted man, was in charge of the ship's damage control teams during this kind of crisis. They rounded the corner and practically ran over Abramowitz, who was assisting security guards Eddy and Lipinski. Stevens was glad to see all three women were wearing lightly armored full EVA gear—which he had months ago made a standard for all *Vinci* damage-control personnel—even though he knew the garments would offer only limited protection without the null-field generators that had been added to the away team's pressure suits. Still, he reasoned, better a small amount of protection than none.

“Did you secure the science lab?” Stevens asked Eddy. She shook her head.

“It’s already gone. We had to seal corridor two.”

“Damn. Let’s get down to deck four.”

Stevens led the way to the turbolift. As he stepped in front of the doors, he realized they were quaking. A thin spray of blistering, liquefied hydrogen jetted out of the crack between the sliding doors and struck his pressure suit like a red-hot scalpel. He dived to his left, tackling Abramowitz as the turbolift doors bulged outward and a jet of superheated semifluid hydrogen began flooding into the corridor. A moment later the wall beyond the turbolift buckled inward as well.

“Run!” Stevens said. “Get to the ladder in section six!”

The five of them began running as quickly as their bulky EVA gear would allow, the churning flood of inferno-hot gases lapping at their heels as they retreated. With the rushing, knee-deep flood rebounding off the bulkheads only seconds behind them, they rounded two corners and logjammed at the emergency access ladder. It was claustrophobically narrow for one person even in a regular uniform, and barely navigable for one wearing a pressure suit. Stevens pushed Abramowitz forward and up the ladder. “Climb, fast.”

Abramowitz scrambled up the ladder as quickly as she was able. As soon as she had climbed high enough for another person to get on the ladder, Stevens pulled Faulwell forward. “Go.” Faulwell grabbed the rungs of the ladder. Stevens looked up to see Abramowitz opening the hatch to deck two and climbing through. Faulwell followed as quickly as he could.

Stevens turned toward Eddy and Lipinski. “Don’t even think about it,” Eddy said. “Move it, Stevens.” Stevens grinned and climbed, his hands hitting the rungs the moment Faulwell’s foot was clear. Stevens glanced down as he neared the top, and saw Eddy on the ladder just below him. As he pulled himself over the lip of the opening onto deck two, he heard an explosion from the deck below and looked down.

Lipinski was at the bottom of the ladder, looking back into the corridor. Stevens thought she was about to say something when a wall of searing liquefied hydrogen slammed into her with terrifying speed and force. She went limp without making a sound, and the flood raced up the ladder shaft.

Eddy, still on the ladder, looked up at Stevens, her expression calm as she pulled the manual release for the access ladder’s emergency bulkhead. The thick barrier snapped shut between her and Stevens, and the upswell of liquid metal struck it with a gruesome, muffled thud.

Faulwell reached down, and offered his hand to Stevens. “Come on,” Faulwell said. “We have to move.”

Stevens, numb, took his friend’s hand. Faulwell helped him to his feet, and gently prodded him forward as they moved to seal the next bulkhead.

* * *

Duffy stumbled to a halt as he found the corridor ahead blocked by imploded walls and burning plasma conduits. He turned back and saw P8 Blue was still right behind him; her annoyed clicking noises, rendered hollow-sounding by their suits’ short-range transceivers, echoed inside his helmet. “If the starboard side is blocked, we’re trapped,” P8 said as she followed Duffy toward their only other route off this deck.

“Lucky for us I’m a gambling man,” Duffy said. The pair turned the corner, and at the far end of the starboard corridor saw Security Guard Loten closing an emergency bulkhead. Duffy waved frantically at Loten and quickened his pace toward the Bajoran man, who noticed Duffy as the bulkhead began to close. Loten reversed the lever, opening the door, and gestured to Duffy and P8 to hurry. Loten pulled the release lever for the bulkhead as the pair scrambled across the threshold, and P8 squeezed through the narrowing gap barely in time.

Duffy and P8 were just getting their bearings on the other side of the bulkhead as Loten started hurrying off port-side. Duffy keyed his suit’s comm. “Loten. What’s the fastest route to the bridge?”

Loten stopped, turned back toward Duffy, and forced open a pair of sliding doors leading to an empty, horizontal turbolift shaft. “Only way forward, sir,” he said, pointing into the shaft. “Breaches all over this deck. Ladder’s still clear in section one.” Loten turned away and resumed his rush toward the port-side corridor. “Gotta seal the mid-hatch before we lose this deck. Good luck, sir.”

Loten sprinted clumsily away in his EVA gear and vanished around the corner. Duffy and P8 stepped into the horizontal turbolift shaft, closed the sliding doors behind them, and activated their wrist beacons. Until now, Duffy had thought of the *Vinci* as a small ship. Suddenly, it looked much longer than he had remembered.

As he and P8 moved toward the front of the ship, the sounds of the crumpling outer hull seemed to grow louder and more distinct. Then he realized it was because the thunder and roaring currents he had been tuning out for the past several hours had suddenly ceased. For a moment, he wondered if they had escaped the storms and made it out of the atmosphere.

Then the shrieks of collapsing metal from the ship’s outer hull grew worse than ever, and Duffy realized that the *Vinci* hadn’t climbed above the storms. The ship wasn’t on its way back to space. It had been pulled below the storms, into the thermal vortex.

It was sinking.

* * *

Concentrate, Chief Diego Feliciano reminded himself as he worked. Focus. His thoughts kept drifting homeward, to his wife, Arlene, and only son, Carlos, and he had to keep tearing himself back to the present. He and Damage Control Team Four were racing to boost the power to the ship’s structural integrity field, which was failing under the steadily rising pressure of the atmosphere.

To Feliciano’s left, security guards Friesner and Frnats were at the end of the dead-end corridor, following a series of extremely simplified directions being given to them by Lieutenant Keith Kowal, the ship’s gamma-shift operations officer, who was standing at the other end of the corridor, working on his own tangle of wires and pile of burned-out circuits. Friesner had no trouble identifying this or that piece of hardware, but Frnats didn’t know an ODN cable from an isolar chip, and Kowal was quickly growing impatient with the Bolian woman.

“Just take the small, red rectangular thing out of the top left slot, and throw it on the floor,” Kowal said. Frnats did as he instructed, and for the moment things seemed to be on track.

“Chief,” Kowal said, “how’re we doing with the holo-generator bypass?”

“Almost done, sir,” Feliciano said. If Kowal’s numbers were right, they had less than two minutes to increase the SIF’s power before the entire ship imploded. As soon as Kowal finished his EPS tap, Feliciano would shunt it and the ship’s other auxiliary power sources to the new bypass. As long as they didn’t have to explain to Frnats what any of that meant, they might just make it.

Or they might not.

The corridor’s outer wall began to warp, and the deck under their feet heaved and contracted. This corridor was seconds away from disintegrating. Feliciano saw his own look of recognition reflected in the faces of Kowal, Frnats, and Friesner.

Kowal turned his attention back to the EPS bypass in front of him. “Feliciano, I need you to stay,” he said, then nodded his head sideways toward the open doorway beside him. “Frnats, Friesner, move forward and seal this bulkhead behind you.”

Friesner continued rerouting various independent power sources to Kowal and Feliciano’s new relay. “Seal it yourself, sir,” she said, her hands moving quickly inside the mangled machinery. “I’m still working here.”

Frnats turned to face the bank of glowing isolinear chips in front of her. “Ready for your next order, sir.”

Kowal nodded. “Connect circuits one and two.”

Feliciano saw the pieces of his own engineering puzzle quickly coming together. “Ready for bypass in ten seconds, sir,” he said confidently. Just a few more seconds. We can do this.

There was a deafening roar as the wall behind the damage control team splintered. Feliciano felt the searing heat on his back even through his radiation-shielded pressure suit. It reminded him of the worst sunburn he ever got, when he was a boy visiting his grandfather’s house in Havana, where his wife and son now lived and were home waiting for him. Carlos’s seventh birthday was nine days away. Diego had missed his son’s last birthday, and he had promised Carlos he would make it home this time. “Cross my heart and hope to die,” he had said, drawing an X with his finger across his chest, while his son mimicked him and flashed a smile wider than the Crab Nebula.

Kowal shouted something to Feliciano, then turned and reached for the manual bulkhead release. Feliciano couldn’t hear the lieutenant over the wrenching of metal and the howling of liquid-metal hydrogen geysering up through cracks in the deck. He felt his footing slipping.

He made an educated guess that Kowal’s EPS tap was ready; with one hand he opened the switch to his own makeshift circuit, and with the other he made the sign of the Cross. Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia... The jury-rigged power relay pulsed to life.

Feliciano saved his last thought for Arlene and Carlos as the deck disintegrated and the outer wall exploded.

* * *

Lense’s eyes adjusted from the glare of her medical tricorder to the dimly lit sickbay. She was standing over Nancy Conlon, who’d been carried in by security officer Stephen Drew (who was unhurt, as usual) a few moments ago with a sizable chunk of broken duranium protruding from her shoulder blade.

Lense looked from one end of sickbay to the other and counted only six people besides herself: Drew, Conlon, Corsi, medical technician John Copper, Nurse Sandy Wetzel, and Emmett, the Emergency Medical Hologram, who probably didn't even really count as a person. Of the six, only Corsi and Conlon were patients. Lense knew that was a bad sign—in a crisis of this magnitude, few wounded meant many more dead.

She removed the jagged shrapnel from Conlon's shoulder. The petite engineer bit down on her lip and stifled a cry of pain—not that anyone but Lense would have been able to hear her over the melancholy wails of the *Vinci*'s crumpling outer hull. Wetzel shone a light on Conlon's wound, and Lense was glad to see it was clean of any metal fragments. "Emmett, hand me the sterilizer, please," Lense said.

The holographic physician passed the tool to Lense. "Sterilizer."

Lense used the device to clean the wound, then handed it to Copper and looked back to Emmett. "Dermal regenerator," she said. Emmett reached for the device on the rolling cart next to him. His hand passed through the cart, then a static flicker disrupted his holographic body.

"Emmett?" Lense said. "Are you losing power?"

"A moment, Doctor, I'm running a diagnostic." Emmett's eyes darted from side to side, as if he were reading an invisible book at tremendous speed. He looked up, past Lense, to his program's manual interface on the far wall of sickbay. "Doctor," he said sharply. "Evacuate your staff and patients immediately."

"What's—"

Emmett's voice became distorted and plagued with bursts of harsh static. "The computer that runs—snrrkkzzt—my program is experiencing cascade—grzzrrttt—hardware failures. That wall has been breached from the other side."

Lense grabbed her field surgery kit from the rolling cart. "Wetzel, Copper, grab everything you can!" She slung her surgical kit diagonally from her left shoulder and reached for a first-aid kit. "Surgical supplies, hyposprays, anything!" Wetzel and Copper scrambled to collect every portable piece of sickbay they could find. Lense slung the first-aid kit from her right shoulder and turned toward Conlon. "Can you walk?"

"I think so," Conlon said.

"Go. Drew, you carry Corsi. Everybody move!"

Drew lifted Corsi and moved straight for the door, with Conlon right behind him. Lense sprinted across the room to her office, scooping every loose item within reach into her first-aid kit. She leaned into her office and grabbed from her desk the thank-you plaque she'd been given by the president of Sherman's Planet, and dropped it in with the hyposprays and neural stimulators.

She stepped quickly to the door, and paused in front of Emmett, whose program was rapidly disintegrating. She had told herself hundreds of times he was just a program, a simulation and nothing more. But watching him come apart was like watching a person die, and she couldn't hide her tears, which were undeniably real. "Good-bye, Emmett," she said.

"Good-bye, Doc—skrrzzk—tor," he said. As his program collapsed, his garbled, disembodied last

words echoed in the empty sickbay. “It’s been an honor serving with you.”

Lense had forgotten she was still standing in sickbay until Drew shouted her name. “Dr. Lense! Come on!”

Lense sprinted out of sickbay as the back wall began to collapse. Drew closed the door behind her, then grabbed her arm and pulled her roughly down the pitch-dark corridor. “Sickbay won’t hold,” he said. “And without pressure suits you folks are sitting ducks. We have to get you up to deck two.”

Lense ran behind Drew, trying to follow the thin, quaking beam of light from his pressure suit’s wrist-mounted palm beacon. They turned the corner and found Wetzel, Copper, and Conlon waiting for them. Copper and Wetzel were carrying Corsi; each of them had one of the comatose security chief’s arms draped across their own shoulders. Conlon had activated her own palm beacon and was widening its beam to better illuminate the corridor ahead. Drew pointed forward.

“Move out,” he said. “Double quick-time.”

The group hurried down the narrow corridor toward an access ladder. They all had just congregated beneath it when the corridor behind them reverberated with a thunderous explosion, followed by a shock wave that knocked them to the deck. They heard the rapidly growing roar of something coming toward them.

Drew sprinted away from the group, back the way they had come. Lense had never seen anyone run so quickly, in or out of a pressure suit. “Go!” he yelled back over his shoulder. “Get up the ladder!” Conlon scrambled to get a handhold on the rungs. Wetzel and Copper, holding Corsi between them, froze.

Lense glanced back and saw the flood of superheated liquid-metal hydrogen raging around the corner less than ten meters away. Drew leapt toward one of the emergency bulkhead levers, located just a few meters ahead of the oncoming wall of destruction. He grasped the lever with both hands and let the weight of his falling body pull it down. The emergency bulkhead emerged from the wall and closed quickly as the flood raced toward it.

Drew was on the flood side of the bulkhead. His momentum had carried him past the safe side of the door, and he was unable to get back on his feet in time.

The barrier closed. The corridor vibrated with the low-frequency rumble of the flood striking the bulkhead with enough force to annihilate anything in its path. Lense forced herself to turn away from what she had seen and focused on what she had to do next.

Save the living first, she thought, reminding herself to think like a doctor. She concentrated on remaining calm; detached; professional. Save lives now. Grieve later. She’d done it before, when her entire medical staff and half the crew of the Lexington were killed at Setlik; she’d do it now.

“Are you all right to climb?” she asked Conlon.

“I’ll make it,” Conlon said. Lense helped her onto the ladder, and Conlon started her ascent. Lense stood beside Wetzel and Copper and stared back down the corridor at the sealed bulkhead. Grieve later.

As soon as Conlon was far enough ahead, Lense stepped onto the ladder and began climbing.

* * *

“Hawkins, get those fires out!” Gomez said to the muscular, dark-skinned security guard who’d been assigned to the bridge. She tripped over a chunk of the debris that had killed McAllan and dodged out of Vance Hawkins’s way as he hurried past her to extinguish the flames erupting from the science station and licking madly at the ceiling. The bridge was thick with smoke, the stench of burned circuitry, and the smell of blood. The few display screens that hadn’t been destroyed now showed only infrequent static.

“Depth nearing fifty-three thousand kilometers,” Ina said without looking up from the ops display. She was still at her post, desperately wringing every bit of information she could from her failing console. “Hull pressure is thirty-five million GSC and rising.”

“Wong,” Gomez said, “Increase power, pull us up!”

“We’ve lost the warp core and impulse power’s offline,” Wong said. He was trying to pilot the ship with only one hand and half a helm interface. The left side of his console had exploded and shredded his left hand with hundreds of tiny pieces of shattered data crystals and tripolymer membrane.

“Thrusters,” Gomez said. “All thrusters to maximum.” She knew it was illogical to think navigational thrusters alone could enable a ship the size of the *Vinci* to reach escape velocity from the gravity well of a gas giant, but she had to try.

Wong complied, but the banshee-like groan of the ship’s collapsing hull was punctuated by another deep, muffled explosion—the sound of another section of the ship being compromised and flooded.

“Ina, can we get more power to the structural integrity field?”

“Not from here,” Ina said. “It’s already at maximum.”

“How long will it hold?” Gomez asked, dreading the answer.

“On auxiliary power?” Ina tapped a few keys. “Seventeen hours, forty-one minutes.” Her console chirped a warning. “But we’re about to—” The bridge’s emergency lights flickered erratically, then dimmed rapidly. “—lose auxiliary power,” Ina said, finishing her thought as her console went dark.

Wong turned away from his console to face Gomez. “Helm’s gone, Commander,” he said flatly. “She won’t pull up.”

Activity on the bridge halted. There was nothing more to say, nothing more to be done. Gomez sagged to the floor next to Captain Gold, who lay unconscious, his left hand pinned under a ton of duranium. Soloman was kneeling next to the captain, providing whatever first aid he could.

Gomez considered recording a final log entry, then realized she couldn’t—there was no power for the log recorder. All around her, the bridge crew seemed dazed, paralyzed. She wiped the blood from her brow, and smeared it across the front of her uniform jacket. As she did, she felt the bump of something in her jacket’s inside pocket. She reached inside and took out the ring Duffy had given her nearly seven hours ago.

The diamond was flawless. It caught even the dimmest glimmer of light from the emergency illumination above Gomez’s head and seemed to shine in her hand. She didn’t know if Kieran and Pattie had made it back aboard the *Vinci* before the *Orion* made impact. She caressed the gem’s cold facets with her fingertip, and tuned out the cries of distress from the *Vinci*’s fracturing outer hull.

An ear-splitting, bone-jarring impact rocked the ship. As the last of the emergency lights went out, the last thing Gomez felt was the diamond ring clutched in her hand.

TO BE CONTINUED

About the Author

DAVID MACK is a writer whose work for Star Trek spans multiple media. With writing partner John J. Ordovery, he cowrote the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine episode “Starship Down” and the story treatment for the Star Trek: Deep Space Nine episode “It’s Only a Paper Moon.” Mack and Ordovery also penned the four-issue Deep Space Nine/Next Generation crossover comic-book miniseries *Divided We Fall* for WildStorm Comics. With Keith R.A. DeCandido, Mack cowrote the Star Trek: S.C.E. two-parter *Invincible*, currently available in paperback as part of the collection titled *Star Trek: S.C.E. Book 2: Miracle Workers*. Mack’s solo Trek writing includes the *Star Trek: New Frontier Minipedia* and the trade paperback *The Starfleet Survival Guide*. Mack also has worked behind the scenes on several Star Trek-related CD-ROM games and products produced by Simon & Schuster Interactive. *Wildfire* is Mack’s first solo work of long-form prose. He currently resides in New York City.

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