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WILDFIRE
Book Two of Two

David Mack



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Chapter

1

Captain's Log, Stardate 53781.1.

First Officer Sonya Gomez recording: Theda Vinci's salvage of the Federation Starship Orion—which was crippled by an unknown phenomenon in the atmosphere of Galvan VI—has taken a tragic turn.

Our first attempt to recover the ship's top-secret cargo—a protomatter-fueled warhead called Wildfire that can ignite gas giant planets into dwarf stars—was aborted after Security Chief Corsi was critically injured during an encounter with a peculiar, luminescent energy field of unknown origin.

A second attempt to recover the device by Second Officer Duffy was also aborted. When Duffy and P8 Blue's transport became trapped in an atmospheric anomaly during their return to the Vinci, Captain Gold ordered us to move closer and intercept them. During the recovery attempt, a thermal event catapulted the Orion into a collision with the da Vinci.

Theda Vinci has sustained massive damage, and the crew has suffered several casualties. We're still assessing the damage and counting the dead. Without main power, we can't escape the atmosphere, which will crush us in less than an hour when our structural integrity field collapses. But even if we avert that imminent threat, another looms close behind it: the Wildfire device, now armed and loose in the atmosphere, is counting down to detonation in approximately three hours.

* * *

Gomez saved her log entry and turned off the tricorder. From behind her, she heard the snap of Ina Mar cracking another chemical flare to life, adding its pale violet glimmer to the dim glow of other flares the red-haired Bajoran woman had scattered around the smoke-filled bridge. Gomez brushed a lock of her long, dark curly hair from her forehead, then gingerly touched the gash on her forehead with her fingertips. The wound was still sticky with half-dried blood.

The emergency lights had not come back on, which meant even auxiliary power was gone. The only

thing keeping the ship's structural integrity field from collapsing under the pressure of the gas giant's atmosphere was a very small number of industrial-grade sarium krellide batteries with what were now certain to be very abbreviated life spans.

The bridge was eerily quiet. There was no throb of engines, no hum of life-support systems, none of the muted vibrations through the deck that became routine elements of the environment when one lived aboard a starship. Now that the ship had sunk below the meteorologically active levels of the planet's atmosphere, the cacophony of thunder and thermal swells that had buffeted the ship for hours before the accident were conspicuously absent.

The groaning of the hull had also diminished significantly; Gomez grimly concluded that most of the outer compartments and lower decks had imploded after the collision with the Orion, and the habitable areas of the ship were now likely limited to the central areas and uppermost decks. Fortunately, that included the bridge which, though damaged, was still mostly intact. Gomez surveyed her surroundings; it stank of charred wiring, chemical flame retardant, and blood. Vance Hawkins from security was extinguishing the last of the small fires inside the shattered aft console displays; Ina was lighting another chemical glow-stick; Songmin Wong, the conn officer, exited through the bridge's aft door to the corridor outside, where the crew had set up a makeshift triage area.

Dr. Lense knelt in the center of the bridge, next to the unconscious Captain Gold. The white-haired captain's left hand and wrist were pinned under a heavy mass of fallen ceiling support beams; the small mountain of metal would have killed him had the ship's tactical officer, Lieutenant David McAllan, not leapt forward and sacrificed his own life to push the captain most of the way clear. Lense glanced at the display of her medical tricorder and shook her head as she reached into her shoulder bag for a laser scalpel. With quiet precision she activated the beam, and a faint odor of searing flesh crept into Gomez's nostrils as Lense began amputating the captain's left hand just above the wrist. She cut quickly through muscle and bone, the beam cauterizing the flesh as it went. She clicked off the scalpel and put it back into her shoulder bag.

"Commander?" Lense said to Gomez, nodding toward Gold. Gomez helped her lift the captain from the deck; he seemed surprisingly light. They carried him out to the corridor, where Nurse Wetzel and medical technician John Copper tended to five patients, who sat on the floor. The light from Wetzel's and Copper's palm beacons slashed back and forth in the darkness as the pair moved from one patient to another.

The two women gently placed the captain between the gamma-shift helm officer, Robin Rusconi, who was awake and grimacing as she bore her pain in silence, and gamma-shift tactical officer Joanne Piotrowski, who was unconscious. Lense took a dermal regenerator from her shoulder bag and slowly repaired the jagged wound on Gomez's forehead. Gomez stood still and let Lense work. Gomez watched Wetzel and Copper position a handful of violet glow-sticks Ina had just brought them, trying to maximize their area of illumination. She looked back at Lense as the doctor finished and put away the regenerator.

"Do we have a head count, Doctor?"

Lense nodded and watched Wetzel and Copper as she answered. "Four confirmed dead: McAllan, Eddy, Lipinski, and Drew. Another eighteen missing and presumed dead—most of them in the engineering section and damage-control teams." She gestured to the five patients in the corridor. "We have five seriously injured: Gold, Corsi, Piotrowski, Rusconi, and Shabalala. The rest of us I'd call 'walking wounded.'"

“How soon can you have them back on their feet?” Gomez said, gesturing toward the wounded. Lense shook her head.

“Without a sickbay? No time soon.” Lense held out her medical tricorder and flipped through several screens of data while interpreting it for Gomez.

“Shabalala has third-degree burns over almost half his body,” she said, referring to the beta-shift tactical officer. “Rusconi has a shattered femur and fibula, a broken knee, and a fractured pelvis. Piotrowski has a serious skull fracture and concussion, a broken clavicle, and multiple internal injuries. She’s lost a lot of blood, and she’s still hemorrhaging. Lucky for her she has the same blood type as Wetzel. We’ll start transfusing her in a few minutes, then I’ll begin surgery.”

Gomez frowned. “Gold and Corsi?”

“Gold’s in shock. Corsi’s still comatose, but stable.”

Gomez nodded. “Keep me posted, Doctor.” On the edge of her vision, she caught the flicker of a new beam of light emanating from around the corner at the end of the corridor. The shaft of light bobbed with the walking motion of whoever was carrying it, revealing by degrees the curling ribbons of acrid smoke that snaked lazily through the corridors. A long shadow was cast ahead of the beam, its shape amorphous but growing more distinct as its owner neared the corner.

A moment later, Gomez was relieved to see the familiar, diminutive eight-limbed shape of P8 Blue, the da Vinci’s Nasat engineer. P8 was walking upright and appeared unharmed. The palm beacon silhouetting P8’s body was still behind the corner. Then P8 stepped forward, and Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy entered the corridor behind her. He swung his beam across the row of seated patients, then onto Gomez.

“Everybody hurt?” Duffy asked. “Anyone all right?” Gomez usually appreciated Duffy’s sarcastic humor, but this time his instinct to deflect tragedy with a flip remark annoyed her. She said nothing as he and P8 walked over to her.

“Sorry we’re late,” the tall, fair-haired engineer said quietly as he settled in next to Gomez. “Traffic was a—”

“Round up everyone who can walk and join me on the bridge immediately,” Gomez interrupted. She turned and strode purposefully back to the bridge.

From behind her, she heard Duffy’s quiet reply: “Yes, ma’am.”

* * *

Duffy and Stevens, both free of their bulky environment suits and back in regular uniform, stood together at the aft end of the bridge, leaning against the railing and looking over the pile of broken metal that was now hard not to think of as McAllan’s burial mound. Gomez paced over a short open patch of deck in front of the mound, reversing direction after every third or fourth step, being careful always to turn in the direction that kept her from making eye contact with Duffy. Her every motion was watched by eleven of the fourteen remaining, assembled active members of the da Vinci crew, besides herself. Only Lense, Wetzel, and Copper were absent, busy preparing for surgery on Piotrowski.

“Where, exactly, are we?” Gomez said to Wong. The once-boyish-looking Asian man cradled his crudely bandaged left hand as he sat in front of his scorched, shattered helm console. Gomez noted that

Wong seemed to have aged in the past few hours. The look in his eyes had changed, had become hard and distant.

“We’re about fifty-nine thousand kilometers deep in the atmosphere,” Wong said, “drifting around the planet’s equator, suspended in a layer of superheated liquid-metal hydrogen. The structural integrity field is the only thing keeping our hull from melting. Once the SIF runs out of power, it’s anyone’s guess whether we’ll burn up or be crushed first.”

Gomez turned toward Ina, who was seated at what was left of her regular post at ops. “Engineering damage report?”

Ina checked her tricorder. “The warp core’s been ejected, leaving us without main power or warp propulsion. The impulse system’s ruptured, and all fusion cores went into auto-shutdown as a fail-safe. Auxiliary power failed when the strain of maintaining the structural integrity field overloaded the EPS taps. Right now, we’re running on half emergency battery power, and most of that’s going to the integrity field, which’ll collapse in less than an hour.”

“What about escape options?” Gomez said, turning toward Stevens. “Can we abandon ship? Or send a distress signal and hang on until a rescue team arrives?”

“Afraid not, Commander,” Stevens said. “Subspace transmitters are gone, and both our shuttles were destroyed by a hull implosion—not that they’d survive long this deep in the atmosphere. Life support’s offline, and we’re down to four hours of breathable air. Most of the escape pods and a lot of the spare environment suits were lost when the outer compartments imploded. And, even if we could get a signal out, the nearest rescue’s at least eighteen hours away. We’ll either be out of power or out of air long before then.”

Gomez rubbed the stinging sensation from her eyes with the palms of her hands. “What about the main computer?”

Soloman cocked his head slightly. “Tricorder scans indicate the computer core is still intact, but without power we will not be able to bring it back online.”

“Could you power it up with one of those portable kits?” Duffy said. “Like the one you brought aboard the Orion?”

“Yes,” Soloman said. “But I do not think I can reach the access hatch to the core.”

“Most of the corridors on that deck are either flooded or have imploded,” P8 said.

Gomez nodded, and turned to Conlon. “Conlon, we need to buy ourselves some time,” Gomez said to the young woman. “Three more hours, to be precise. Is there any way for you to bring auxiliary power back online for just three more hours?”

Conlon looked petrified by the question. “By myself? Commander, the whole engineering staff is gone, except for me. How am I supposed to—”

Gomez cut her off. “Nancy. We need power to keep the structural integrity field operating for the next three hours while we look for a way out of the atmosphere. I don’t care how you do it, but find a way, and do it before the reserve batteries run out in—” Gomez checked her tricorder’s chronometer “—about forty-five minutes. Just buy me two more hours after that.”

“Why only two hours?” Carol Abramowitz asked.

Hawkins turned to the short, slender cultural specialist and answered plainly. “Because that’s when we estimate the Wildfire device will detonate, igniting this gas giant into a small star. If we’re not gone by then, we’re dead no matter what.”

Bart Faulwell, the ship’s middle-aged cryptographer, sighed heavily and shook his head. “I’m so glad you asked that, Carol. Really, I am.”

“I know we’re down to a skeleton crew,” Gomez said, trying to sound reassuring as she looked around the bridge at the desperate faces surrounding her. “But we need to restore power to the SIF in the next forty minutes. Once that’s done, we’ll focus on escaping the atmosphere.” She turned quickly from one person to the next as she fired off orders in a tone that brooked no questions.

“Duffy, Stevens, you’re with me. We’ll reroute any independent power sources we can find to the emergency batteries.

“Robins, Hawkins, find a safe route to the main computer core for Soloman. Check all emergency bulkheads along the way, make certain they’re holding.

“Conlon, Pattie, look for a way to purge main engineering, the impulse core, or any other compartment from which you can reroute primary and auxiliary power.

“Faulwell, Abramowitz, search all secure areas of the ship for extra environment suits, drinkable water, rations, first-aid kits, light sources, tools, tricorders, anything that might be even remotely useful.

“Soloman, Ina, Wong, stay here and try to restore bridge operations.

“Everyone report back here in exactly twenty minutes. And do your best to come bearing good news.”

Chapter 2

Faulwell and Abramowitz struggled for breath as they forced the sliding door half-open and peeked into Lense and Corsi’s quarters. The air in the ship was quickly growing hot and stale without the life-support system to counter the heat radiating through the hull from Galvan VI’s searing atmosphere.

Faulwell slipped inside the room first, leaving behind in the corridor a makeshift sack he had fashioned by knotting together bedsheets taken from Lipinski and Eddy’s shared quarters. The sack was now almost filled with salvaged first-aid kits and small pieces of standard-issue equipment collected from throughout the ship.

Abramowitz followed Faulwell into Lense and Corsi’s dark, tiny room, the beam from her palm beacon set wide and casting an enormous, sharp shadow of Faulwell on the far wall.

Faulwell quickly rifled through Lense’s side of the room, in a routine at which he was quickly becoming too proficient for his own comfort. He looked over his shoulder and noticed that Abramowitz seemed to be procrastinating, dwelling too long on the small knickknacks that had fallen from a shelf and landed in a

random arrangement on Lt. Commander Corsi's bunk.

"Carol?" Faulwell said. "You okay?" Abramowitz nodded. "Then we need to hurry," he said. "Check under her bunk—maybe she keeps a spare phaser rifle."

Abramowitz crouched, pulled open the drawers below Corsi's bunk, and started to toss aside articles of civilian clothing. Faulwell finished his own search, which had yielded a spare medical tricorder and a first-aid kit—both of which Lense kept conveniently under her pillow—and turned to see Abramowitz lifting from Corsi's drawer a rectangular wooden case with a clear top. Inside the case was an antique axe. It had a broad, squarish, spike-backed steel head, its red paint heavily scuffed. The head was affixed to a meter-long, gently curved wooden handle whose rough grain and faded flecks of yellow paint betrayed its antiquity. The base of the handle was sheathed in thick, black rubber. The head of the axe rested on a triangle of folded, dark-blue fabric decorated with white stars.

At the bottom of the case, on the glass, there was a small brass plaque bearing an inscription:

A firefighter performs

only one act of bravery in his life,

and that's when he takes the oath.

Everything he does after that

is merely in the line of duty.

In Memoriam—September 11, 2001

"Looks like a family heirloom," Faulwell said.

Abramowitz looked up at Faulwell. "Corsi would want this. We should bring it to her."

"I don't think it's what Gomez had in—"

"Fine, I'll carry it," she said sharply. She stood, cradled the cumbersome box in her arms, and walked toward the door.

"Carol, we're gonna make it out of this," he said, unsure whether he sounded convincing.

She stopped and rested the end of the box gently on the floor, her back to him.

"What if we don't?" she said. The angry tone of her question caught him off guard. She turned back to face him. "If you die out here, what will Anthony do?"

He recoiled for a moment, then cocked his head slightly, chuckled, and took his best guess. "I figure he'll throw a party."

"A party?"

"Mm-hmm. Invite all our friends, serve my favorite lasagna. Play my favorite Chopin nocturnes. Probably try to eulogize me as some kind of Starfleet hero instead of the—" He paused. "Instead of the

glorified academic I am.” He looked at Abramowitz’s face and realized he had been mistaken—she wasn’t angry, she was afraid. Her sardonic façade was crumbling as he watched. Her eyes were wet, her voice quaking with emotion too long kept under lock and key.

“There’s no one to throw a party for me, Bart.”

“Carol? Are you—”

“I’ve been on the *da Vinci* for almost three years, Bart, and you’re the only one I’m really friends with. I just haven’t been able to make a . . . a connection with any of the others, and I don’t know why.”

“Maybe it’s the *drad* music,” he said with a smile, hoping humor could steer her out of her downward spiral.

“Bart, I’m serious. I don’t want to be alone anymore.”

“What’re you talking about? You’re not alone, you’re—”

“Oh, c’mon, Bart. I get along with Pattie and the others, but I don’t. . . I don’t have any family besides you. At least, not anybody who would make the effort to throw a party in my honor. And if we both die here. . .” Abramowitz wiped the tears from one eye with a rough swipe of her palm, then from the other with the back of her hand. “There won’t be anyone back home who’ll be interested in making up kind lies about me.” She took a breath, choked down the beginning breath of a sob. Faulwell felt his own emotions stir in empathy, as if she were radiating her sorrow to him in waves. “I feel alone in the world, Bart. I don’t want to die alone. I don’t want to die without falling in love, just once.”

Her revelation stunned him. He’d always seen her as his not-too-personal confidant, fellow gossipmonger, and sarcastic conversational foil. He’d never considered she might be hiding something like this. She was quick, sharp, a paragon of control; twenty-four hours ago he would have denied she could even form tears. “You’ve never been in love?” he said, trying to sound sympathetic. She glared at him. He guessed she had taken his words the wrong way. She turned away from him.

She picked up the case containing the axe and squeezed through the half-open door, back to the corridor. Still clutching the medical tricorder and first aid kit, he followed her out, hoping the next bunk he searched might contain the comforting words he suddenly couldn’t find.

* * *

Elizabeth Lense was reluctant to perform invasive surgery while seated on an unsterile blanket in a smoky corridor, but she knew that Ensign Piotrowski would certainly die if she didn’t take the risk. Copper knelt on the other side of the patient, holding a palm beacon above her torso, the beam aimed directly down and focused to provide maximum illumination.

In medical school, Lense had heard a centuries-old Earth saying about surgeons: “Sometimes wrong; never in doubt.” She reminded herself that surgery never came with guarantees, no matter how advanced the technology. No physician’s knowledge or skill are ever perfect; even with the simplest procedure, it can’t be assumed the patient will come through improved—or even alive. The key was to know this and cut anyway.

She activated the laser scalpel, ignored the sickly sweet odor of burning flesh and fatty tissue as she deftly made a long inverted-Y incision below Piotrowski’s sternum, and reached down and exposed the

interior of the abdominal cavity.

Lense suppressed her response to the adrenaline rush she experienced as she felt Piotrowski's blood warming her hands through the sterile surgical gloves. She marveled at the raw physicality, the carnal beauty of this type of hands-on surgical technique. It had been a long time since she'd had to cut open a living patient by hand—not since her time on the Lexington during the Dominion War. Emergency field surgery was a required course at Starfleet Medical School, but almost no one specialized in it. Lense wondered whether that was because Starfleet doctors were too arrogant to think any situation could ever be so dire as to warrant performing surgery anywhere but in a state-of-the-art operating theater, or because someone in Starfleet was afraid surgeons might once again learn to enjoy wielding the calculated violence of a scalpel.

“Cardiac regulator,” she said, her voice steady and authoritative. Copper hesitated as he eyed the array of medical instruments laid out on the sterile cover in front of him, then picked up the long, needlelike device and handed it to Lense. She took it quickly and, in a smooth, measured motion, pushed it inside Piotrowski's torso.

Lense concentrated on the subtle tactile cues she sensed as she pushed the device deeper. She felt it travel easily through a pocket of fatty tissue, catch slightly on the denser muscles beneath, then tremble with a subtle change in resistance as it pierced the wall of the thoracic aorta. She keyed the device's main switch, and it threaded itself forward into the heart, stabilizing Piotrowski's pulse and blood pressure.

“Clamp.”

Copper handed her the instrument, and she set to work securing the inferior vena cava so she could repair damage to the vein. She cast a brief glance at Wetzel, who was lying still next to Piotrowski. All of Wetzel's vitals were normal, and the transfusion was running smoothly.

Lense visually inspected Piotrowski's intestinal wall for perforations. She was certain it was undamaged but decided it would be best to get a second opinion. “Copper, run a scan and make sure the lower colon is intact.”

Copper checked the readout of his medical tricorder, which hummed with an almost musical oscillation as he scanned Piotrowski. “All clear, Doctor.” Lense nodded. There was still much work to do repairing the pancreas and the ruptured left kidney, but she had no doubt she would save Piotrowski.

She just hoped she wasn't wrong.

* * *

Gomez held the dimming, crooked chemical flare at arm's length in front of her as she navigated the pitch dark corridor by a combination of memory, instinct, and hearing. Ahead of her she heard the muffled sounds of someone swearing from behind a bulkhead and the clang of a metallic object being struck repeatedly against something hard. Both sounds grew louder as she continued forward.

She stopped as she reached the origin of both sounds, which continued unabated. “How's it going, Kieran?” she said.

The swearing and clanging ceased. “Never better,” Duffy said, his voice muffled behind the bulkhead. “You?”

“Can’t complain,” Gomez said. “Nancy and Pattie found a working extractor in cargo bay two. They expect to have main engineering cleared in less than an hour.” She paused as Duffy tumbled out of a ragged gap in the wall, his uniform catching on every protruding edge. “Will the da Vinci still be here in an hour?” she said, offering him her hand. She helped him to his feet. He stood bathed in the magenta light of her dying flare.

“Good question,” Duffy said. “Fabe thinks we can boost the auxiliary system with the backup phaser generators, if we can override their security lockouts.”

“How long will that take?”

“A few seconds—once the main computer is back online. The command lines are intact, but right now there’s no way to reach the generators directly. The computer’s the only way.”

Gomez frowned, then sighed. “Any other ideas?”

“None that’ll work. Have Hawk and Robins checked in?”

“Not yet,” Gomez said. “I’ll have them brief Soloman on the best route to the core. Find Fabian and go help get engineering ready.”

“You got it,” Duffy said as he picked up his tools. Gomez started to move toward the forward ladder to Deck Two, then stopped as Duffy added, “I am glad for one thing, Sonnie.” She stopped, turned, and looked back at him. He continued, “Time like this, I’m glad you’re in command.”

Gomez nearly laughed. “Yeah?” She shook her head. “I’m not.” She walked away, slowly shaking her head in disbelief. It was then she noticed that the hand she’d used to help Duffy was now coated in some kind of grease. She wiped it off across the front of her already filthy uniform jacket, and felt the bump of the diamond ring he had given her only hours earlier still tucked safely in the jacket’s inside pocket.

She reached in, took out the ring, and turned back. She wondered what she’d say to Duffy as she gave it back to him, wondered how she would explain that she shouldn’t have accepted it at all...at least, not yet.

Duffy was already disappearing around the far corner, on his way to find Stevens. Gomez considered calling out to him, then thought better of it. This wasn’t the right time.

Less than thirty minutes ago I was clutching this ring like it was my last hope, she thought. Now I can hardly wait to give it back. She put the ring back into her jacket’s inside pocket and shook her head. I hate irony.

Chapter 3

Soloman stood next to Gomez in the deck one corridor and studied the schematic on the first officer’s tricorder display, flipping through it one screen at a time. “You’ll have to cut through this bulkhead into the Jeffries tube here,” Gomez said.

Hawkins and Robins had detailed a circuitous route, through maintenance crawlspaces and narrow gaps

between various systems that were tightly packed together inside the Vinci's primary hull, to a Jeffries tube that would enable Soloman to reach the main computer core. Soloman eyed the still-smoldering opening that Hawkins and Robins had just cut from the wall with their phasers. "I am not sure I can fit between the comm relay junction and the secondary EPS conduit," the slightly built Bynar computer expert said. Gomez gestured to the narrow space depicted on the schematic.

"Hawkins and Robins think the relay shifted when the outer hull buckled on the other side of it," she said. "You should have enough room to get by, even in a pressure suit."

Soloman imagined himself being sucked out a narrow opening in the hull and crushed in the blistering depths of Galvan VI's liquid-metal lower atmosphere. "If the hull has ruptured there, it might present an impassable hazard."

"The atmosphere at this depth is less active than it was where we boarded the Orion," Gomez said reassuringly. "With the null-field generator already installed on your suit, you shouldn't have any trouble reaching the main computer core."

Soloman was not reassured. He picked up the portable kit he had carried aboard the Orion to reboot its core. "After I restore power to the core, what is my first priority?"

"Reroute backup phaser-generator power to the structural integrity field," Gomez said. "That'll give us enough time to work out a plan for getting back into orbit."

"What is my secondary priority?"

"Sensors and navigational control."

"Understood." Soloman stepped through the phaser-cut portal and squeezed into the narrow crawlspace, pulling in his portable data-recovery terminal behind him. With his other hand, he activated his suit's helmet beacon. The narrow beam revealed an awkward and claustrophobically tight space he would have to traverse to reach Jeffries tube One-Bravo. As he lowered himself down and reached for a handhold, he heard behind him the gentle thud of the hastily cut bulkhead plate being put back into place, followed a few moments later by the high-pitched screech of it being phaser-welded shut.

* * *

Lense finished closing the incision in Piotrowski's abdomen and permitted herself a sigh of relief that the young ensign's vital signs all appeared stable. She turned off the dermal regenerator and handed it back to Copper.

"Can you take care of disconnecting the transfusion?" she asked him.

He nodded. "Yes, Doctor," he said.

Lense stood and pulled off the blood-caked surgical gloves. She dropped them into a waste-collection canister she'd set off to one side of the corridor and moved to check on the condition of the beta-shift tactical officer, Anthony Shabalala.

As she passed Corsi, a rectangular shape caught her eye.

She glanced over to see that while she had been busy operating on Piotrowski, someone had retrieved

Corsi's family-heirloom firefighter's axe and tucked it under the left arm of the tall, blond woman, who remained comatose. The image of Corsi lying supine with her axe under her arm reminded Lense of a drawing she had once seen of a dead Viking warrior resting on a bier with his weapon at his side.

Kneeling next to Corsi, Lense reached out, and felt with her fingertip for Corsi's jugular. She closed her eyes and concentrated on sensing the weak pulse. It was faint but steady.

Lense opened her eyes and gently stroked a stray lock of hair from Corsi's forehead, then silently moved on to tend to Shabalala.

* * *

Ensign Songmin Wong tried again to close his left hand around the sonic driver. His wounded appendage refused to obey. He winced as needlelike stabs of pain jolted up his arm, and he shifted the tool to his right hand.

He was fairly certain his helm console could be repaired. The power supply capacitor had overloaded, causing half of the console's surface to explode outward. He had already replaced the capacitor; now all he needed was a new surface panel.

With his right hand operating the sonic screwdriver, he used his left to hold steady an interface panel he was cautiously removing from the port-side auxiliary engineering station. This console had been spared the fate of several of other key stations on the bridge; if he could attach it to the primary conn circuit, the da Vinci would be ready to fly within the hour.

While he worked, he listened to Gomez and Ina talking Soloman through his long climb-crawl to the ship's main computer. Wong was glad he wasn't the Bynar right now.

"I've reached the comm relay junction," Soloman said, his voice small and hollow-sounding through Gomez's combadge. Until the ship's main computer was back online, the crew was limited to direct combadge-to-combadge transmissions.

"Is it passable?" Gomez said. The first officer stood at the aft end of the bridge, behind the tactical station, her arms folded and her brow wrinkled with concentration.

"Affirmative," Soloman said. "Hawkins and Robins were correct. The secondary EPS conduit has broken free and shifted point-nine-eight meters to port, away from the relay."

"Is the hull behind the relay intact?" Ina said.

There was a long delay before Soloman replied. "Negative," he said. "I am seeing a break approximately seven meters long fore-to-aft, and three meters wide port-to-starboard. The structural integrity field is preventing atmospheric intrusion, but the field appears to be weakening rapidly at this location."

"Move quickly, Soloman," Gomez said, her voice sharp with concern. Wong caught the worried looks that flashed between the first officer and Ina. "Get to the Jeffries tube and start cutting through now."

Wong detached the engineering console and carefully slipped his left forearm underneath it, taking care not to put pressure on his wounded hand.

"Commander, I have reached the Jeffries tube and—" Soloman's comm signal was overwhelmed

momentarily by static. “—now. Estimate entry to Jeff—” Another burst of white noise drowned out the Bynar’s transmission, this time for several seconds. Gomez tapped her combadge anxiously.

“Soloman? Soloman, please respond.”

Wong paused in his work as the scratching drone of audio interference dragged on. Then, Soloman’s voice broke through just long enough for him to utter words that gave Wong a sick feeling in his stomach.

“Commander, something is happening....”

* * *

Soloman tethered his safety line to one of the Jeffries tube’s exterior structural supports.

“Commander, I have reached the Jeffries tube and am preparing to cut through now. Estimate entry to Jeffries tube in approximately ninety-five seconds.”

Soloman drew his phaser and steadied his arm to make a circular cut, on an angle, through the curved side of the Jeffries tube. He paused as his helmet beacon dimmed. He started to check its connections, and froze when its beam was suddenly extinguished. He keyed his comm. “Commander, something is happening. I am unsure what—” His suit’s heads-up display blinked out, and he became aware of the sudden, terrible silence that enveloped him. Then he felt his weight increase to an excruciating degree, pinning him down against a series of pipes and assorted device casings.

Trapped against the machinery in the *Vinci*’s outer skin, Soloman stared upward at the hull rupture. The integrity field covering the tear in the hull began to flicker erratically. Soloman concluded his odds of surviving a hull implosion and atmospheric breach were negligible.

The integrity field fizzled and blinked out. The atmosphere rushed in, a flood-crush of liquid-metal hydrogen under so much pressure that it was as hot as the surface of a star. Soloman was thankful that his end would, at least, be swift.

He closed his eyes.

Seconds later the end seemed, to Soloman, oddly overdue.

He opened his eyes to see the swirling, churning fluid mass of the atmosphere suspended mere centimeters away from him. The radiation alone should have been sufficient to terminate my life processes, he thought. This is quite unusual.

His surprise increased as the torrent of liquid-metallic atmospheric gases slowly withdrew from the confined space, retreating finally to hold its ground outside the gash in the hull. Soloman stared in wonder at this blatant refutation of the laws of physics and fluid dynamics.

The gases outside the rupture became suffused with an amber glow. A double-helical latticework of light descended like a ladder from the semifluid darkness into the narrow crawlspace, where it slowly grew and began to rotate on its vertical axis in front of Soloman. He suddenly felt weightless, and he realized that his freedom of movement had been restored.

The perplexed Bynar studied what, to him, resembled a three-dimensional sculpture of photonic energy. It was built in complex layers, each composed of dozens or even hundreds of tiny, moving beams of light.

Some beams were nearly half a meter long; others were as short as a few centimeters and radiated from the longer beams, like branches on a tree. Each horizontal layer contained beams perfectly parallel to those in layers above and below; in some places, two or more horizontal layers were bridged by vertical beams of light.

Soloman marveled at the range of hues he perceived in the double-helix of light as it turned slowly counterclockwise in front of him. He realized the layers were undergoing myriad chromatic shifts too subtle for him to detect in their entirety.

He observed the behavior of the individual layers; watched how they rotated at slightly offset rates; noted how the beams that linked them shifted vertically, some rising, others descending; witnessed scores of individual beams—some nearly as fine as a human hair—fade out of existence while others shimmered randomly into being elsewhere in the lattice. . . .

No, he thought, a sudden flash of understanding taking hold. Not randomly. There is an order to it. He reached out slowly and let his gloved finger pass through the latticework. He felt an electric tingle not unlike the surge he sometimes experienced when making direct neural contact with a powerful computer. This sensation was far less mechanical, but it still had the flavor of an intense, data-rich energy stream.

He drew back his hand and saw that the beams had changed color around the point where he had made contact. Ripples of indigo radiated away in widening concentric circles. He saw complex patterns taking shape in the movement and arrangement of the beams, the patterns of their colors, the tempo with which they changed, appeared, or vanished. . . .

As quickly as it had appeared, the luminescent phenomenon suddenly withdrew, fading into oblivion even as it retreated. Soloman steeled himself for the sudden, catastrophic return of the atmosphere—then was startled by the hum of his pressure suit returning to normal function. Above him, the structural integrity field crackled back into place—still struggling to keep the high-pressure atmosphere at bay, but undeniably once again functioning.

Soloman turned back to the exterior of the Jeffries tube, braced himself, and prepared to cut through with his phaser. He aimed his phaser, then keyed his comm circuit. “Soloman to Gomez. I am preparing to cut through to the Jeffries tube now.”

“Soloman! Are you all right?” Gomez said, her voice pitched with anxiety. “We lost contact. What happened?”

Soloman triggered his phaser and started cutting through to the Jeffries tube. “I will make a full report once I have reached the core, Commander.” He executed the circular phaser-cut with tremendous geometrical precision. “I suspect you will find my report. . . .” He at first resisted the impulse to pun, then gave in to the moment: “Enlightening.”

Chapter 4

“You’re sure it wasn’t a natural occurrence?” Faulwell said. He and Abramowitz had joined Gomez, Hawkins, Robins, Ina, and Wong on the bridge to hear Soloman’s report. “Some primitive crystalline life-forms are known to emit energy in patterns of prime numbers. It fooled more than one deep-space contact team back in the early days.”

“I am quite certain that what I saw was neither random nor natural,” Soloman said. Everyone had strained to hear his voice from Gomez’s combadge until she interplexed the Bynar’s signal to everyone else’s combadges as well. “It did not repeat in simple progressions, but I am certain there was a pattern to its organization.”

“Could it have been a probe?” Ina said.

“It is possible,” Soloman said. “However, when I made contact with it, I—”

“You made contact with it?” Hawkins said in an accusatory tone that Faulwell suspected the goateed young man had inherited from Corsi.

“Only for a moment,” Soloman said. “My impression is that the phenomenon is information-rich. . . possibly a photonic life-form.”

Faulwell noted a sudden pattern of raised eyebrows making a circuit of the personnel on the bridge. His own imagination raced at the notion of a light-based intelligence. For a moment, he almost forgot the da Vinci’s current predicament. Gomez, apparently, had not.

“Soloman, is the main core back online yet?” Gomez said.

“I am completing the patch-in now, Commander,” Soloman said. “Powering up the core in nine seconds.”

Wong drummed his fingers on his now-repaired helm console. “Maybe it’s a kind of living computer program,” the young conn officer said. “A kind of advanced optical matrix.”

“Perhaps,” Soloman said, although he clearly did not endorse the idea fully.

“Computer program, photonic life-form, alien superweapon,” Abramowitz said. “What’s it doing here, inside a gas giant?”

Robins frowned and looked up from her arms, which she held folded across her chest. “And did Starfleet know about it before it scheduled the Wildfire test down here?”

“Of course not,” Ina said. “Starfleet wouldn’t—”

“We don’t know what Starfleet would and wouldn’t do,” Abramowitz said. “For all we know, this thing was Wildfire’s real target all along.”

“That’s highly unlikely,” Gomez said.

“If I might interrupt,” Soloman said. “I have rebooted the core and established manual control. I am disabling the phaser generator security lockouts now.”

“Good work,” Gomez said. “Notify Duffy and Conlon when you’re done.”

“Acknowledged.”

“Until now, every encounter with this phenomenon has centered around the Wildfire device, yes?” Faulwell said, thinking aloud. “What if this energy we’ve encountered is sentient? Could it have been

acting in self-defense?"

"I think we're getting a bit ahead of the game, here, Bart," Gomez said.

"Commander, if he's right, then this..." Hawkins let the statement hang fire while he searched for the right word. He gave up and continued. "Whatever it is, it might've destroyed the Orion on purpose."

"Okay, we have lots of theories and no facts," Gomez said. "But right now our first priority is to stay alive, then to restore power. Further debate on this topic can wait."

"Just one more thing, Commander," Faulwell said. Gomez looked at him with a glare that he interpreted as, This had better be good. "If we determine that what we've encountered is an intelligent life-form that lives in this planet's atmosphere, the Wildfire device must not be allowed to detonate."

Gomez nodded slowly. "I agree. But right now, we don't have the capability—or the time—to find and defuse the warhead. One thing at a time, Bart."

Faulwell nodded his understanding. Gomez turned back toward the group as a whole. "We'll be rerouting phaser power to the integrity field in a few moments," she said. "Report to your stations and stand by. If there's a burnout I want it contained, pronto."

Everyone snapped to and exited the bridge, with the exception of Ina and Wong, who took their seats at ops and conn. Faulwell followed the group into the corridor, picked up a tool kit, and moved quickly to his duty station. He eyed the items in the kit as he walked and frowned. I don't know what half these things are, never mind how to use them, he thought. I hope I don't have to fix anything by myself, or we're all dead for sure.

* * *

Duffy was going crazy trying to ignore the itch between his shoulder blades. He was anxious to secure main engineering so he could remove his pressure suit and scratch the spot raw.

He and Stevens stood next to P8, off to one side of the door to main engineering, while Conlon operated the extractor that was pumping the superheated atmospheric fluids out of the compartment beyond. The extractor was close to breaking down because they had forced it to work past all its rated design specifications in order to clear a path, one sealed-and-flooded section at a time, down to main engineering. Fortunately, the remote station for closing the outer bulkhead of the now-empty warp core shaft had been intact, and its display indicated the core-shaft bulkhead had been successfully closed. Assuming the system wasn't one giant malfunction, that one bit of good luck meant they might have a chance to restore partial operations in main engineering.

Duffy winced as Gomez's voice squawked loudly inside his pressure suit's helmet: "Gomez to Duffy."

He lowered the gain on his transceiver and replied.

"Duffy here."

"Phaser generators have been rerouted to the integrity field. How're you doing down there?"

"We're almost in," he said. "Stand by."

The extractor whined as its magnetic constrictor overheated for what seemed like the hundredth time in the last twenty minutes. Conlon decreased the extractor's setting and looked pleadingly over her shoulder at Stevens. "Little help?" she said through her pressure suit's fritzing comm. Stevens stepped over, affixed his liquid-nitrogen canister to the machine's auxiliary coolant valve, and opened the nozzle.

"I'm running low here," Stevens said, his comm signal fading in and out. "Make it count." Conlon monitored the thermal gauge for a few seconds more, then returned the machine to full power. The throbbing hum echoed off the close—and now eerily molten-smooth—corridor walls. Duffy keyed his private comm circuit and subtly gestured to P8 to do the same. The short, insectoid structural engineer leaned forward slightly toward him, her body language equivalent of a nod.

"How badly would you say the interior structure's been compromised in flooded areas?" Duffy said. P8 looked around and studied the walls, ceiling, and deck.

"We'll probably lose most of the outer sections once the integrity field drops below forty percent," P8 said. "After that, these bulkheads will fold like paper."

"And main engineering will be cut off," Duffy said.

"No, destroyed," P8 said. "Unless we reinforce the compartment's outer walls from the inside."

"Congrats, Pattie. You just volunteered for that."

"I figured as much."

P8 and Duffy reset their comms to the main channel as Conlon switched off the extractor. She detached the nozzle from the emergency pump valve. "Here's hoping the core-shaft bulkhead holds," Conlon said, checking her tricorder readings of the main engineering compartment. "Ready to proceed."

Duffy wedged a lever between the two halves of the sliding door, which had been partially fused shut by the molten metallic hydrogen. Stevens readied himself at the door's manual-release lever. Conlon and P8 moved back to the emergency bulkhead lever ten meters down the corridor, in case this all turned out to be a big mistake.

Stevens and Duffy forced open the door. Duffy peeked around the corner as Stevens shone his wrist beacon inside.

Duffy squinted, trying to discern shapes through the wavy lines of heat radiation rising off the deck and walls. Main engineering looked mostly intact, except that any nonduranium surface or component had been completely vaporized. Essentially, the room had been reduced to a shell.

Stevens sprayed a cloud of liquid nitrogen across the deck and nearby surfaces. Duffy monitored the temperature changes with his tricorder, then stepped inside as soon as the deck was safe to walk on with the limited protection of the radiation-shielded pressure suits.

You havegotto be kidding me, Duffy thought grimly as he surveyed the damage. Stevens, Blue, and Conlon edged into the room behind him. Duffy keyed his suit's open comm channel.

"Duffy to Gomez."

"Go ahead," Gomez said.

“Main engineering’s secure, but I don’t think it’ll be much use. It’s gutted down to spaceframe.”

“Are any of the key systems intact?”

Duffy looked around at the smooth, featureless walls. “Hard to tell. Computers’re gone, consoles, everything. Core shaft is sealed.” He glanced at P8 and pointed toward the deck. “I’ll have Pattie go below to check antimatter containment.” P8 moved off quickly to find an access hatch to the main engineering sublevels. “Fabe and I’ll see if any of the spare-parts bays are intact. Maybe we can jury-rig you an engineering console.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Just one catch.”

“Wouldn’t be a day in Starfleet without a catch,” Gomez said.

“Sonnie, the impulse reactors are ruptured and the warp core’s gone—I mean, literally, gone. And there’s no way we’re getting outta this gravity well on battery power.”

“So what’s the problem?” Gomez deadpanned. “Don’t you have a so-crazy-it-just-might-work plan for just such an occasion?”

Duffy snorted, happy to volley the gallows humor right back at her. “Don’t you?”

If only this were a laughing matter, he thought as he stared down the empty warp core shaft to see a featureless bulkhead plate where the ventral magnetic injectors should have been.

* * *

Soloman worked quietly and efficiently, despite his growing concern regarding the state of the *Vinci*’s main computer. When he and 111 had first reported to the *Vinci* as civilian observers, they had begun to make many direct interfaces with this system. When 111 died and Soloman relinquished his designation of 110 rather than rebond with another Bynar, he had enlisted in Starfleet, stayed on the *Vinci*, and continued that program of general upgrading to the ship’s computer. He felt he had formed a bond of mutual understanding with the complex computer. Its heuristic networks, anticipatory subroutines, and state-of-the-art interface persona made it as real an entity to Soloman as any of his organic crewmates.

Now, the entire system was disoriented. Input nodes had been cut off, and power surges had crippled key backup circuits. Compounding the tragedy, Soloman realized that physical damage to the sickbay computers had prevented the main computer from initiating a protective backup of the Emergency Medical Hologram’s enormous memory database. Years of interactive learning for the EMH’s AI had been irretrievably lost.

For the Bynar, this was like seeing a brilliant friend and colleague reduced to a state of dementia.

He isolated the sensor protocols and ran a fast diagnostic. The software seemed uncorrupted, as did the sensor log database. However, without at least auxiliary power to the ship’s sensor network, he would be unable to confirm whether any of the ship’s vast array of detection devices were still operable.

He analyzed the sensor logs to verify their last recorded data point. He was encouraged to find the database had recorded a significant amount of data during the moment of impact by the Orion, and in the critical minutes that followed. The ventral sensor relays had failed on impact, and other sensor failures had cascaded outward from the point of impact as sections were breached, bulkheads collapsed, and power reserves failed.

Now that Stevens and Duffy had rerouted power from the phaser generators, Soloman had sufficient power to perform basic computer operations. But even with the auxiliary generators back online, Soloman knew it would not be enough. There would be no escape from the atmosphere without main or impulse power.

He replayed the visual sensor log and winced as he watched the Orion's primary hull smash against the belly of the *Vinci*. The Orion's primary hull, already stressed to its limits, shattered and crumpled inward even as it ripped open the *Vinci*'s underside from fore to aft. A cloud of wreckage torn loose from the two ships was swept up by the swift-moving atmospheric currents and swallowed alongside the vessels by a thermal vortex. The visual record distorted and degenerated into static as the two ships were pulled down together toward the lightless, crushing core of Galvan VI.

Soloman replayed the sequence again, from the collision to the end of the file. He checked its final seconds, and confirmed he was seeing the image correctly and not indulging in an irrational human behavior known as "wishful thinking." He paused the image on a blurred silhouette of the Orion's shattered hull and keyed his suit's comm. "Soloman to Commander Gomez. I have information you need to see immediately."

* * *

Ina watched P8 toggle the switches on her tricorder, which, using a few old tricks and some spare ODN cable, the *Nasat* had connected to one of the bridge's science station viewscreens. Ina wrinkled her ridged Bajoran nose at the stench of death that permeated the bridge. There had been no time to remove McAllan's body—or Gold's hand—from beneath the mound of duranium in the center of the bridge. The odor of decay was growing worse with each passing minute and was aggravated by the heat.

P8 pointed out details from several enhanced images Soloman had transmitted to her from the *Vinci*'s visual sensor logs. The images detailed moments from its collision with the Orion. Gomez and Duffy stood together opposite Ina and listened to P8, whose spiel was peppered with clicks, whistles, and other telltale signs of her heightened anxiety. "As you can see here," P8 said, "Orion's primary hull struck our ventral hull at an oblique angle. The force of impact crushed most of the Orion's saucer, which had already been weakened from damage it sustained in the atmosphere. That was our first lucky break—"

"You call that lucky?" Ina said, wiping sweat from her forehead. The temperature inside the ship was climbing rapidly, and so far only P8 seemed physically equipped to handle it. Ina silently envied the insectoid engineer.

"If her hull had been intact, she would have cut us in half," P8 said.

Ina raised her hands in concession. "Continue," Ina said, breathing a bit more raggedly than usual.

"That initial impact ruptured several sections on our lower decks and cost us our warp core—which, in turn, caused an overload that destroyed our impulse systems."

P8 flipped to an image from late in the sequence. The broken husk of the Orion was barely visible,

shrouded in atmospheric vapors and blurred by rapid motion. P8 touched a key on her tricorder and over-laid a wireframe representing the structure of the Orion. “This is how much of the Orion survived the impact,” she said. “This is only a visual log, so we have no guarantee that its hull was strong enough to hold together after it entered the thermal vortex. But if it did, her engineering hull appears in this image to be mostly intact—and Lt. Commander Duffy reported that the Orion’s warp core seemed to be undamaged during his inspection a few hours ago.”

Ina raised her eyebrows disparagingly. “Pattie, are you suggesting we—”

“Locate the Orion and salvage her warp core,” P8 said. “Yes.”

Ina looked at Gomez and Duffy. “Will that work?”

Duffy shrugged. “It’s not impossible,” he said. “The Steamrunner-class ships were built at the same shipyard as the Saber-class. Same warp core design.”

“That,” P8 said, “was our other lucky break.”

“Even if Orion’s warp core is intact, the odds of finding it down here would be astronomical,” Ina said. She fought to keep her eyes open and her voice steady. The heat and the stench were making her light-headed. “It could be anywhere.”

“Actually,” Duffy said, “she probably isn’t far from us at all. Assuming the Orion was pulled down with us...” Duffy advanced the image sequence on P8’s tricorder to show the twisted spaceframe of the Orion sinking into the darkness alongside the *Vinci*. “She probably got caught up in the same equatorial current we did.”

Gomez nodded.

Ina continued to play Devil’s advocate. “We still don’t have sensors,” she said.

“I’ll talk to Fabe,” Duffy said. “This reminds me of one of his war stories.”

“Even if you find the Orion,” Ina said, “do you really think you can reach it, salvage its warp core, install it on the *Vinci*, and restore main power in less than two hours?”

Gomez and Duffy looked at one another and shrugged. “It’s so crazy,” Duffy said, “it just might work.”

I hate when he says that, Ina thought with a scowl.

Chapter 5

Duffy and Stevens stood on opposite sides of the spread-open innards of a Class-Four atmospheric probe.

“This really brings back memories,” Stevens said, clicking off his dynospanner as he pulled out the probe’s passive-sensor assembly and tossed it aside.

“If you start telling your Defiant story again, I’m gonna space you,” Duffy said, only partly kidding. He twisted his wrist into a position he wasn’t certain it could go, reached under the power core, and decoupled the probe’s magneton scanner. He set it on the deck as Stevens began adjusting several small components in quick succession.

“Modifying this thing to circle the equator and send out active tachyon pulses to ‘ping’ the Orion is the easy part,” Stevens said as various subsystems inside the probe hummed to life. “Problem is, with our comm systems down we won’t have any way of getting the data back from the probe.”

“I already thought of that,” Duffy said. “You’ll need to patch a tricorder into one of the da Vinci’s small passive sensor arrays. We’ll divert just enough power to the array to receive a narrow-band signal from the probe.”

“A tricorder won’t be able to parse the signal without—”

“—a subspace transceiver, I know,” Duffy said. “If you can’t find one around, use the one in your combadge.”

“Good idea. I mean, why would I need my combadge during a crisis, right?”

Duffy glared at Stevens.

“Combadge. Right. Yes, sir,” Stevens said.

Duffy sighed and resumed modifying the probe.

“Sorry, Fabe,” he said. “It’s been a long day... for all of us.” Stevens nodded and handed Duffy a magnetic caliper. Duffy was about to say he didn’t need it until he looked down at the component he was working on and realized he did need it.

“Thanks,” Duffy said.

“Don’t mention it.” The two men worked in silence for a few moments. Stevens glanced up at Duffy. “Have you had a chance to talk to her yet?”

“To who?” Duffy said.

“Who do you think?” Stevens said.

“Not really. Hasn’t exactly been a good time.”

“There’s never a good time, Duff. Sometimes you—”

“Fabe, we’re less than two hours away from a fiery implosion. I’d call this a worse time than most.”

Stevens considered that. He shrugged. “Touché.”

They worked for several seconds longer. Stevens put down his tool and closed the panel he was working on.

“I just thought of something,” Stevens said. “With the launchers offline, we’ll have to deploy this thing

manually.”

“We can probably use a Work Bug for that,” Duffy said. “Did you secure Bug Two after you brought Corsi back from the Orion?”

“Yeah,” Stevens said. “Should be safe and sound in Bay Five.”

Duffy nodded, picked up his tools, and moved toward the door. “I’ll get Bug Two ready,” Duffy said. “Finish refitting the tricorder and get it hooked up to the sensor array.”

“Sure thing, Duff,” Stevens said. “One last thing?”

Duffy paused in the doorway and looked back at Stevens.

“You should at least get the ring back,” Stevens said.

Duffy seriously considered spacing Stevens, then recalled that in addition to being his best friend, the enlisted engineer was the only one on the *Vinci* qualified to pilot Bug Two and deploy the probe. Bug One, which had been fitted with modified seating customized for P8 Blue’s physiology, had been lost in the collision with the *Orion*.

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Duffy said as he made a mental note to revisit the spacing of Stevens at a later time.

* * *

The bridge was silent and sweltering hot. Sonya Gomez crawled out from under an aft console, stood up, and felt her shoulders sag from exhaustion. Her hair was drenched in sweat, and her normally immaculate uniform was coated in grime and broad swipes of her own dried blood.

The smoke that had earlier choked the bridge had dissipated and wafted out into the corridor beyond the bridge’s aft exit, but a thick haze remained. Gomez felt it catch in her throat as she tried slowly to draw a deep breath. She coughed raggedly, hard enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Ina and Wong had made as thorough repairs to the ops and conn stations as were possible under the circumstances. Small standby lights blinked dimly on both consoles, indicating minimal auxiliary power was still online. Gomez had finally restored basic functions to one of the auxiliary consoles, and routed to it a combination of engineering and science functions she thought would be necessary if the *Vinci* got a chance to make an attempt to reach orbit.

With one hand against the wall to steady herself, Gomez moved slowly toward the aft exit, being careful to monitor her breathing. The air supply was quickly running low and the temperature inside the ship was soaring. With replicators offline and most of the emergency water supplies lost along with the escape pods, dehydration was now as serious a risk as suffocation.

She leaned in the open doorway and looked out at the dimly lit row of her sleeping shipmates, sprawled head to toe, parallel to the corridor walls. The few emergency air supplies Faulwell and Abramowitz had been able to find were given—on Dr. Lense’s orders—to Corsi, Piotrowski, Gold, and Shabalala. Their lives rest in Fabe’s and Kieran’s hands now, Gomez thought. The crew had done all they could without main power, and the best thing any of them could do now was rest and conserve air. Recovering the warp core from the *Orion*—if, in fact, it was still in one piece—was the *Vinci*’s only chance of

escaping the atmosphere before its integrity field collapsed.

The worst-case scenarios paraded through Gomez's mind, one after another: If Duffy and Stevens failed to modify the probe correctly...if the probe failed to locate the Orion...if the Orion's warp core had been destroyed...if the da Vinci crew were unable to recover, install, or activate the salvaged core in time...Gomez's morbid reverie was cut short by the chirp of her combadge, followed by Conlon's voice. "Conlon to Gomez."

Gomez turned away from the aft corridor and stepped away from the open door. "Go ahead."

"Partial life support restored in main engineering." Conlon paused to catch her breath, then continued. "Maintenance bays are intact. Primary deuterium injector repaired."

"Good work, Nancy. You should get some rest."

"Not..." Gomez heard Conlon cough and fight to draw another good breath. She imagined that as hot as it was on the bridge, it had to be far worse for Conlon, who was working alone in main engineering, trying to effect repairs that usually required a full complement of engineers under even the best of circumstances. "Not yet," Conlon said. "Still have to replace...the antimatter injector."

"What's after that?"

"Just...the easy part.... Installing...and cold-starting...a warp core...from a floating wreck."

"Just hang on, Nancy," Gomez said. "As soon as the probe's ready, I'll send Duffy down to help you."

"Thanks, Commander.... Conlon out."

The channel closed with a barely audible click. Gomez slumped down into a chair in front of one of the gutted aft stations, all too aware that she and the surviving crewmembers of the da Vinci had just under two hours to perform a miracle.

* * *

The near-silent vibration of the medical tricorder in Elizabeth Lense's hand woke her from a groggy half-sleep. She had set the tricorder to alert her if any of her critical patients' vital signs changed significantly. She glanced at its display and saw a strong series of biometric readings from Captain Gold.

Lense sat up quickly, then stopped as a wave of dizziness robbed her of balance. The air had become dangerously rich with carbon dioxide and left her light-headed. She put her air supply to her mouth, pulled a breath of clean oxygen/nitrogen mix into her lungs, and slowly stood up. She exhaled into the rebreather and took another breath as she walked slowly to Gold, who was sitting up against the corridor wall and cradling his left forearm. He stared down at the surgically neat, bandaged stump of his arm—or, more correctly, he stared past it, to where his left hand used to be. He looked up and took the emergency rebreather from his mouth as Lense crouched beside him.

"Doctor," Gold said, his voice rough and dry. He coughed.

"Welcome back, Captain," Lense said. "What's the last thing you remember before waking up just now?"

“I wasn’t hit in the head, Doctor,” Gold said, raising his left arm and wincing slightly at the effort. “My hand and my tactical officer both being crushed. I remember all too well.”

Lense scanned Gold with her medical tricorder and nodded. “You lost a lot of blood, and you went into shock,” she said. “I just want to be sure you—” She paused as he used his right hand to begin pushing himself back to his feet. She stood and put a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Where do you think you’re going?” she said sternly. He continued to pull himself back to a standing position. Unwilling to force her commanding officer back onto the deck, she relented and removed her hand.

“Captain, please,” she said. “You’re in no condition to—”

“Doctor, I just woke up in the corridor behind the bridge. I’m missing a hand, nearly half my crew is sleeping on the deck, and it’s so hot I feel like I’m living in my wife’s oven. I get the impression we’re still in trouble, and I’m going to the bridge to get a report from whoever has the conn. Do you have anything you need me to sign before I go?”

Lense sighed. She reached into her shoulder bag, took out a small hypospray, and prepared it with a small dose of amber medicine. “You lost a lot of blood, and the ship’s air is going fast,” she said. “Let me give you our last dose of tri-ox. It’ll help you keep your strength up.”

Gold nodded his consent. “That better not be a sleeper shot,” he said. Lense took it partly as a joke, but also as a warning. There was a soft hiss as she injected him.

“Not a chance, sir,” she said. “I’m saving those, just in case.” Gold wrinkled his brow at her.

“Just in case what?”

She didn’t want to tell him she intended to sedate the crew if the implosion of the ship became imminent. She wouldn’t impair their faculties while there remained a fighting chance for survival, but if the plan she had overheard Gomez and Duffy hatching on the bridge failed, she intended to make the crew’s final moments as painless and peaceful as possible.

“Just...in case,” she said. She closed her shoulder bag and moved aft to check on Corsi and Piotrowski. She felt Gold’s eyes linger on her back for a moment, then she heard his footsteps recede as he moved forward to the bridge.

* * *

Stevens guided an antigrav sled into the makeshift hangar the crew had set up for the two, industrial-size Work Bug utility craft they had brought aboard five weeks earlier. On the antigrav sled was the probe he had just finished modifying.

Duffy was at the far side of the hangar, making final adjustments to Work Bug Two’s auxiliary harness so that it would be able to carry the probe, which was not a standard part of its equipment inventory.

“Still a few things left to tweak,” Duffy said, glancing up from his work. “I thought you were going to comm me as soon as the probe was ready.”

Stevens parked the antigrav sled next to the bulky, battered yellow spacecraft. “I was going to, but I had to scavenge my combadge’s transceiver to get the tricorder interplexed with the sensor array,” he said.

“Good idea,” Duffy said. “Wish I’d thought of it.”

At least he’s got his sense of humor back, Stevens thought. “Anything I need to know about launching this thing?” Stevens said. Duffy shrugged.

“I linked the release mechanism to the welding circuit,” Duffy said. “That work for you?”

“Sure, no problem,” Stevens said. “As long as the null-field generator holds out.” The Work Bug suddenly seemed far more beat-up and fragile than he remembered. He wasn’t looking forward to making another flight through the atmosphere. Although it was far less turbulent at this depth than it was above, the environment was still hostile and chaotic enough to make Stevens wary of overestimating his own piloting skills.

“You’ll be fine,” Duffy said as he turned off his sonic screwdriver. “Either that, or we’ll all die hideous deaths.”

“Have I ever mentioned that you inspire me?” Stevens said.

“No, but I suspected as much.” Before Stevens could craft another verbal riposte, Duffy’s combadge chirped.

“Lense to Duffy.”

“Duffy here. Go ahead.”

“Is Stevens with you?”

Duffy shot a disgusted glance at Stevens. “Hey, Fabe, it’s for you.” Stevens raised an eyebrow, then leaned toward Duffy’s combadge and made an exaggerated show of speaking at the second officer’s chest.

“Stevens here. Go ahead, Doc.”

“The patient you asked about is regaining consciousness,” Lense said. Stevens had asked her to inform him if da Vinci security chief Domenica Corsi’s condition changed. Lense was one of only a handful of people aboard the da Vinci who knew of the one-night stand Stevens and Corsi had shared months ago. She also knew that what had begun as a quickly forgotten tryst had recently started evolving into something entirely different.

Stevens looked at Duffy, who was also among the small number of people who knew of the budding connection between him and Corsi. “You can hook this up by yourself, right?” Stevens said, nodding his head sideways toward the probe. Duffy frowned.

“You have to launch it in less than ten minutes.”

“I’ll be back in five,” Stevens said.

Duffy sighed, then nodded. Stevens tossed the antigrav sled’s control padd to Duffy and jogged toward the door. “On my way, Doc,” Stevens said. As Stevens bounded out of the hangar bay, he barely heard from behind him Duffy’s string of grumbled curses, which were drowned out by the sound of a sonic screwdriver being pounded repeatedly against something metallic.

* * *

Not like this...

Corsi's last thoughts before losing consciousness aboard the Orion echoed in her mind as she shuddered awake. Her skin tingled uncomfortably. She was aware she was lying on the deck, and that her pressure suit had been removed. The heat was stifling and the air hazy. A standard-issue Starfleet emergency rebreather covered her nose and mouth.

She tried to lift her right hand to remove the rebreather, but her right arm was numb. Not numb, she realized as her right leg also failed to respond to her efforts to stand. It's paralyzed. I'm paralyzed.

She concentrated on moving the fingers of her left hand. With great effort, she felt them slowly curl into a fist and uncurl. Her left arm was wrapped around something. She remembered that paralytics and amputees sometimes believed they could sense phantom limbs. Fearing the worst, she gently rolled her head to the left and lowered her chin.

Looking down the line of her arm, she saw her family's twenty-first-century heirloom firefighter's axe, safe in its transparent aluminum case and tucked securely beneath her arm. She opened her left hand and closed it around the case. I'm back on the da Vinci, she thought. I'm home.

She heard footsteps approaching quickly. Someone running. She strained to focus, squinted to see who was rushing toward her in the smoky half-light. As the running figure grew closer, the cadence of his steps, the shifting weight and balance of his body as he moved, even the measure and timbre of his breathing were comfortingly familiar to her. Fabe.

Stevens sat beside Corsi and gently grasped her left hand in both of his. He wore a bittersweet smile that conveyed both relief and lingering fear. "Hey," he said in a soft voice. His eyes were bloodshot—likely from exhaustion as much as from smoke and fumes inside the ship, Corsi guessed. She mimicked his crooked smile and grasped his hands as tightly as she could.

"Hey, yourself," she said in a brittle voice.

Several seconds passed as they clasped hands in silence. There were so many things she wanted to say to him, but she couldn't find the right words. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her palm with a tenderness she was ashamed to admit frightened her.

"That's what I wanted to say," she said. She touched his cheek with her fingertips.

He reached down and stroked her sweat-soaked blond hair along her temple, followed it behind her ear. "I hope you get the chance," he said, looking away. Corsi suddenly became aware she was lying at one end of a short row of da Vinci personnel who were sleeping in the corridor behind the bridge. She heard no throb of engines, no muted hum of life-support systems. And Fabe was clearly afraid, more so than she'd ever seen him.

"It's bad?" she said. He nodded. "How many—" She hesitated to ask. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer. "How many of the crew—"

"More than half," he said, his voice breaking. She felt the weight of the tragedy suddenly hitting him. He swallowed hard and continued. "We lost almost all the engineers and a lot of security guards. Four bridge

officers, too—McAllan, Kowal, Deo, and Bain.” He was shaking. She sensed the tremors of his body radiating through his arm into her hand. “I don’t know if we’re gonna make it out,” he said. Now she was frightened, too.

“Fabe?” she said. “Are you—?”

“Captain’s all right,” Stevens said, pulling himself together. He took a deep breath and steadied himself. “Lost a hand, but he’ll make it. He’s on the bridge with Gomez.”

“Are you all right?”

Stevens pondered her question. He shook his head and squeezed her hand. “No, not really,” he said. “But I have to get back down to the hangar. As usual, we’re down to one of Duffy and Gomez’s last-ditch, long-shot plans.”

Corsi smiled coyly at him as he let go of her hand and stood up. “I feel better already,” she said.

“Yeah?” he said, and let out a soft, bemused chuckle. “I don’t.” He began to turn away, stopped, and pivoted back toward her. “I’ll see you on the other side of a million-to-one shot,” he said. She nodded in small motions.

“Count on it,” she said. He nodded to her, the edges of his mouth curling into a hesitant smile, then he strode quickly away, vanishing into the smoky shadows at the end of the corridor. Corsi watched his every step, keenly aware she might never see him again—that in fact, it was likely she wouldn’t.

No one had ever accused Corsi of being an optimist. As she lay paralyzed and waiting in the darkness for her fate, she hoped it wasn’t too late for her to change.

Chapter

6

Ina hunched closely over the ops console. Gold and Gomez both hovered close behind her shoulders. The captain and first officer scrutinized the Bajoran woman’s every move as she monitored the probe Duffy and Stevens had modified and launched a few minutes earlier. The display on her console had been set to parse the echoes of the probe’s tachyon “pings,” a crude but effective means of pinpointing the location of the wreckage of the starship Orion.

The extremely limited, pale-blue glow from the bridge’s few working monitors and consoles now provided its only illumination. The handful of chemical flares Hawkins had lit here had been moved down to main engineering, where lighting was most desperately needed.

A series of indeterminate static splotches on the monitor resolved into the familiar configuration of a Federation starship’s engineering hull. “I think I’ve got it,” Ina said. She enhanced the scan resolution and enlarged the image for detail. “Approximately one hundred nine kilometers below our present depth, sixty-eight-point-three kilometers ahead of us in the equatorial jet stream.”

P8 Blue poked her head in from beneath Gomez’s elbow and looked over the scan results. “Engineering hull looks intact along its center line,” the Nasat structural engineer said, then made a few thoughtful-sounding clicking noises. “However, the rate of deformation indicates the remainder of the

Orion 's hull will buckle in less than an hour.”

Gold glanced over to Wong, who sat listening to the conversation. “Wong, can you get us to the Orion on thrusters alone?” Gold said, as Duffy and Stevens hurried onto the bridge through the aft corridor entrance.

Wong worked at the helm console for a few seconds, then answered, “Aye, sir. It’ll take about thirty minutes.”

“Lay in a course and engage,” Gold said.

As Wong began entering coordinates into the helm control, a second signal began to appear on Ina’s monitor. Gomez and P8 noticed it as well. Duffy and Stevens both pushed in and stared down over the shoulders of the much-shorter Gomez.

“Sir,” Ina said, “we have a second signal.”

“More wreckage?” Gold said, turning back toward Ina and her standing-room-only crowd of onlookers. Ina studied the data from the probe and answered even as she was still finishing her mental analysis of the raw numbers.

“Negative, sir,” she said. “Its depth is approximately nineteen thousand kilometers below our current position, and it’s emitting a powerful energy signal.”

Duffy edged past Gomez for a closer look at the data on Ina’s console. His eyes widened and his nostrils flared slightly as he drew a sharp breath. He straightened his posture and looked toward Gold.

“Sir, that’s a protomatter-based energy signature. It’s the Wildfire device.”

“Oy, gevalt,” Gold said. “It’s at ignition depth?”

“Aye, sir,” Duffy said. He looked at Ina for permission as he pointed to her console. “May I?” Ina nodded. Duffy entered a fast series of commands, then studied the data that flooded across the left margin of the display. Ina recoiled as the towheaded second officer laughed darkly and shook his head. “Yup, it’s armed, all right,” he said. “Eighty-seven minutes to detonation, and counting.”

“Okay,” Gold said. “Thirty minutes to reach the Orion. Gomez, how long to salvage the Orion ’s warp core, install it on da Vinci, and restore main power?”

“No one’s ever done a warp-core replacement in less than six hours,” Gomez said. “But since we’re going to lose the integrity field in one hundred and four minutes when the phaser generators burn out, I’ll say we can do it within an hour of reaching the Orion.” She looked at the data from the Wildfire device on Ina’s monitor. “Assuming we don’t get vaporized.”

“If you can salvage the core,” Duffy said to Gomez, “I can buy you the time you need.”

Gomez nodded. “Sounds like a plan,” she said.

“All right, then,” Gold said. “This is your show, Commander. Take what you need—just leave me two warm bodies to run the bridge, and tell me when we have main power.”

“Aye, sir,” Gomez said. “I’ll need Ina and Wong, so I’ll have Faulwell and Abramowitz relieve them after we lock in our course to the Orion.” Gomez turned toward the young helmsman. “Songmin, plot a course from the Orion’s position back to orbit, leave it ready to go on a single command, then report to Work Bug Two.”

Wong nodded his acknowledgment, and Gomez moved quickly toward the aft corridor. “Fabian,” she said, “round up anyone else who can work and bring them down to main engineering on the double.” Gomez strode off the bridge, projecting confidence that Ina suspected was a bit too optimistic to be believed. P8 and Stevens both followed Gomez out, but Ina noticed that Duffy remained behind. She saw Duffy step close to the captain, and overheard him speaking to Gold in a low voice.

“I need to talk with you, Captain—in private,” Duffy said in a quiet but urgent tone. Gold held his cipher-like expression as he gestured to Duffy to follow him into the ready room. Ina watched them as they stepped quickly off the bridge, leaving her and Wong to exchange silent looks of bewildered concern.

* * *

Gold and Duffy stood facing each other in the ready room, barely able to see one another. Only a small fraction of the weak lighting from the bridge consoles spilled in through the open door, but the crew had been adjusting to the steadily decreasing illumination aboard the ship. When Gold pondered the extent of the damage to his ship, he was almost thankful for the darkness.

“What’s on your mind, Duffy?” he said. “Don’t like our chances?”

“Honestly, sir, I don’t,” Duffy said. “But that’s not what concerns me.”

“Quickly, Duffy.”

“Sir, did Commander Gomez brief you about Soloman’s encounter with the energy phenomenon?”

Gold blinked and felt a flush of concern. Gomez had said nothing of a second direct encounter; she had limited her reports to ship’s status and casualty lists. “I don’t recall that she did,” Gold said in a careful tone.

“Sir, Soloman reported that it had a logic to it—a unique intelligence. It might’ve been a probe, but he said it felt more organic, like an AI. And sir—it could’ve let him die when it breached the hull, but it didn’t. I think...” Duffy paused, but Gold anticipated the next statement formulating in the younger man’s mind. “Sir, I suspect it might have been trying to establish contact. I can’t prove anything yet, but I think it might be—well, a life-form.”

Gold groaned. He had suspected something similar before the accidental collision with the Orion, while reviewing sensor data with McAllan. “That’s a whole new can of worms,” Gold said, shaking his head.

“Sir, we have roughly eighty-four minutes until detonation. Regardless of whether we succeed in salvaging the Orion’s warp core, we have to stop the warhead.”

“We can’t shut it down from here, Duffy.”

“I’m aware of that, sir.”

“Are you proposing going after it?”

“Yes, sir, I am. We—”

“Damn it, Duffy, you’re a propulsion specialist. I need you here to help Gomez get that warp core online.”

“With all due respect, sir, I don’t think the da Vinci’s going to make it. And frankly, this is more important.”

Gold was growing irritated. “Duffy, if you think you’re going to throw the Prime Directive at me at a time like this—”

“Sir,” Duffy said sharply, “if this ‘intelligent light’ or whatever it is lives here, we might wipe out a species—hell, civilization—if we ignite this planet into a star. We’re supposed to seek out new life, sir, not vaporize it. This is a Starfleet mess. It’s our responsibility to fix it.”

Gold struggled to breathe and calm himself. “I share your concern, Duffy, but the device is nineteen thousand kilometers deeper into the atmosphere than we are.” Gold shot a quizzical look at Duffy. “How do you propose to reach it without being turned into borscht?”

“I’m still working on that, sir,” Duffy said a little sheepishly. “I’ll need to borrow P8 and Conlon to work out the details.” Gold rubbed his chin, which was rough with stubble and slick with sweat. The overpowering heat radiating through the fractured outer hull now dominated every crevice of the tiny ship. Gold glowered at Duffy from beneath a furrowed brow silvered with age.

“You have ten minutes, Duffy. Ten minutes to show me a plan—any plan—for stopping that warhead.”

* * *

Duffy was fairly certain the plan he was proposing was one of the worst, most half-baked, ill-considered schemes he had devised in all his years in Starfleet. However, as one of his Academy professors had been fond of saying, “A so-so plan right now is better than a perfect plan an hour too late.” And considering that he, Pattie, and Conlon had formed the plan—and pulled together all the essential components to show to Captain Gold—in exactly nine minutes and forty-four seconds, he couldn’t help but feel a limited swell of pride at the achievement.

“This is moronic,” Gold said without a trace of humor, his voice echoing off the bare walls of the auxiliary shuttle bay.

“It’s the best chance we have, sir,” Duffy said. “I can disarm the warhead in less than ten minutes once I reach it. The trick, of course, is reaching it.”

Gold walked around the other side of the enhanced pressure suit, whose backside now was festooned with so many peripheral attachments that it looked less like a pressure suit and more like a tiny spacecraft. Surrounded by a ring of four chemical flares on the deck at its feet, it was cast in sinister, vertical streaks of purple light and ink-black shadow.

The suit—one of the four used during the boarding of the Orion—already had a built-in null-field generator. Now, in addition, it was saddled with a shuttle-pod’s integrity-field coil that had been twisted to half-encircle the suit’s torso; a sarium krellide power cell salvaged from spare shuttle parts; and a

narrow-band guidance circuit cobbled together from damaged sensor components. The whole assemblage had been fused to a plasma-thruster harness torn from a spare Work Bug chassis.

“This thing’ll run out of power before you get halfway there,” Gold said as he massaged the stump of his left forearm.

Conlon stepped forward before Duffy could speak.

“Actually, sir, the suit is programmed to maintain minimal levels of support during his descent, to conserve power,” Conlon said. “Once he reaches the probe, the integrity field will shift to full power to keep him safe while he works.”

“Who’ll be keeping an eye on you, Duffy?” Gold said, his voice betraying his lingering doubts.

This time P8 jumped in to answer the captain. “Duffy’s vitals will be relayed to the science station on the bridge, where Dr. Lense can monitor his bio readings.”

Gold lifted a suspicious eyebrow at Conlon and P8.

“This question is for Duffy—andonly Duffy,” Gold said. He jabbed a thumb toward the ungainly conglomeration of parts the trio had assembled. “Can you fly this thing?”

“Not to sound like a Ferengi used-starship salesman,” Duffy said, “but it actually flies itself. The plasma thrusters are linked to an autoguidance circuit programmed to home in on the Wildfire device’s energy signature. It’ll take me right to it. I’m pretty much just along for the ride.”

Gold narrowed his eyes at Duffy. “You did all this in ten minutes?”

Duffy shrugged and swapped knowing grins with P8 and Conlon. “We had to cut a few corners,” Duffy said.

Gold tapped the device and studied it for a moment. He glanced at P8 and Conlon. “Dismissed.”

Conlon and P8 stepped quickly out of the shuttle bay, leaving the captain and second officer alone with what Duffy had dubbed “the mother of all pressure suits.” Duffy watched Gold fold his hands behind his back—until the slender, white-haired commanding officer remembered he had only one hand. Gold self-consciously let his arms fall still at his sides as he looked at Duffy.

“The thruster system,” Gold said. “Your work?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Did Blue or Conlon check your numbers?”

“There wasn’t time.”

Gold nodded. Duffy watched him carefully.

“How soon can you be ready to launch?” Gold said.

“Ten minutes,” Duffy said.

“So, you launch at D-minus sixty-three minutes. How long to reach the warhead?”

“Thirty minutes. Less, if I’m lucky.”

“Thirty minutes to reach the warhead,” Gold said, fixing Duffy with a penetrating stare. “You know how many minutes this contraption will last as well as I do—don’t you, Duffy?”

Duffy swallowed. He should have known better than to think Gold wouldn’t notice when the numbers didn’t add up. “Yes, sir. I’d say it has roughly forty minutes of power before its integrity field fails. Best we could do.”

“A one-way ticket,” Gold said.

“Yes, sir.”

Gold sighed heavily. “I’d rather send Corsi if I could,” he said. Duffy nodded.

“She’s still partially paralyzed,” Duffy said. “And she has other injuries. She wouldn’t live through the dive. Hell, I might not live through it.”

“I know,” Gold said quietly. “I know.”

Several leaden moments passed while Duffy waited for Gold to speak his mind.

“Are you ready to do this?” Gold said at last.

Duffy thought of Sonya, then forced himself to forget her just as quickly. “No, sir, I’m not. But I have to go.” Duffy looked Gold in the eye. “With your permission, sir.”

Gold nodded. Duffy coughed, deliberately, to prevent himself from getting choked up with paralyzing sentiment. “If I could ask one thing, sir,” he said.

“Of course.”

“Don’t tell Sonya,” Duffy said. “She has enough on her mind right now, without this.”

Gold nodded and shook Duffy’s hand.

“Good luck, Kieran,” Gold said. “Godspeed.”

Duffy nodded his farewell and smiled sadly.

“And the same to you, sir.”

Chapter

7

Duffy had never been particularly claustrophobic, but now that he was sealed inside the enormous,

jury-rigged pressure suit, he felt severely cramped. The hasty modifications had required the new components be allowed to intrude into the suit's interior. Inertial damping coils jabbed into his lower back; the guidance circuit pressed against his chest. Furthermore, with the entire suit except for his arms secured to the plasma thruster chassis, he had almost no freedom of movement—just enough to reach the Wildfire device and, hopefully, deactivate it.

Through his helmet's wraparound visor he saw Dr. Lense talking at him, but he couldn't hear what she said. Her features were cast in harsh, unnatural shadows from the violet chemical flares on the floor in front of the pressure suit. She was standing on an empty, small cargo case, and her face was practically pressed against the transparent aluminum of his visor. He keyed his suit's exterior audio circuit and her voice crackled through in midsentence.

“—vitals appear steady, and your brainwave patterns are normal,” Lense said. Duffy nodded, and she continued. “Conlon tells me this thing will keep its integrity field at a bare minimum while you descend. You're going to experience some serious pressure effects.”

“I figured as much,” Duffy said. “I'll be fine.”

“I'll be monitoring you from the bridge, just in case,” Lense said. “If you begin to experience aphasia, nausea, tremors, hallucinations, or euphoria, increase the power to the integrity field until your symptoms subside.”

“You got it,” Duffy said, though he had no intention of doing so. If he increased the suit's integrity field above minimum before reaching the Wildfire device, the batteries likely wouldn't have enough power left to give him time to complete the disarming protocol. “Anything else, Doc? Clock's ticking.”

Lense shook her head once. “Good luck, Kieran.”

“Thanks, Doc.” Lense climbed down off the cargo case, clearing Duffy's field of vision. He looked past Lense to see Gomez standing at the entrance to the auxiliary shuttle bay, arms folded in front of her as she eyed Duffy's creation. Lense strode quickly past Gomez, leaving Duffy alone with her.

“Hey, Sonnie,” Duffy said, trying to sound casual.

“You call this a plan?” she said. Duffy noted the teasing lilt in her voice, the tilt of her head, her slightly crooked smile. He had always been smitten with her way of kidding him.

“It's so crazy, it just might work,” he said. And I must be crazy to do it, he thought.

“The timing's going to be tight,” she said, tugging on the connections that held the suit to the thruster chassis.

“I've got it all worked out,” he said with rehearsed confidence. He studied the small details of her face; the graceful slope of her nose; the full curve of her lower lip.

I'll never get to kiss you again.

She brushed a long curl of sweat-drenched hair from her face.

I'll never get to enjoy the scent of your hair after you've washed with your favorite herbal shampoo.

“You always have a plan,” she said. She stepped up onto the empty cargo case and grasped his thickly gloved right hand with both of hers to steady herself. He looked at her hands wrapped around his. He barely felt the pressure of her grasp.

I’ll never get to touch you again.

Never get to hold your hand again.

“Maybe when you get back, we can talk about your plans for us,” she said.

Duffy smiled, betraying nothing. “Count on it,” he said.

He looked into her dark brown eyes. The effort of hiding his thoughts left him with a grotesque churning in his stomach.

She reached up and touched his suit’s faceplate with her fingertips. “Good luck,” she said. “And hurry back—I’ll leave a light on for you.”

“I know you will,” he said softly. She let go of his hand and stepped down to the deck. She picked up the fading chemical flares from the deck and backed away from him, keeping him in her sight as she moved to the corridor exit.

As she passed over its threshold, the auxiliary shuttle bay was engulfed in darkness, and she was bathed in the pale violet glow of the flares in her hands. To Duffy she seemed to shine, like a lighthouse beacon.

I’m never going to see you again.

She pulled the manual door-close lever. As the door slid shut, Duffy activated his suit’s null-field generator. He felt the mechanical rumble of the space doors grinding open. He heard the high-pitched whine of the force field struggling to hold the churning tides of superheated metallic hydrogen at bay. With tremendous effort, he forced himself to turn the suit around to face the force field.

He was surprised to see nothing beyond the force field but darkness. For all the immense thermal and magnetic radiation that raged in the atmosphere of Galvan VI, there was virtually no photonic activity at this depth. This final mission, apparently, was to be dark, silent, hot, and crushing.

He adjusted the frequency of his suit’s null field to match the force field. Without daring to hesitate, he activated the guidance circuit, keyed the thruster, and passed effortlessly through the energy barrier to the lightless inferno beyond.

* * *

Gold stood between Abramowitz, who sat at the ops console, and Faulwell, who sat at conn. To his left, Dr. Lense occupied the science station Gomez had repaired. Lense monitored every minute fluctuation in Duffy’s bio readings, alert for any sign that the second officer might be in more trouble than he could handle.

A moot point now, Gold thought. He caught himself about to second-guess his decision to let Duffy go, then shook it off. No time now for regrets.

Gomez had drafted Ina and Wong—along with most of the rest of the crew who were able to walk—to

assist in the salvage of the Orion's warp core. Knowing that someone needed to remain at conn and ops on the bridge, Gomez had made a coldly logical assessment of which two crewmembers' skills were least suited to the salvage and recovery mission.

Right now, Gomez's logic is the only thing cold aboard this ship, Gold thought. He was unsure which was more suffocating—the heat, or the sharply rising CO₂ content in the ship's few remaining habitable spaces. Faulwell, Abramowitz, and Lense all drooped languidly at their consoles, slowly losing their individual struggles against heat stroke and dehydration.

“Conn,” Gold said in a level tone of voice that projected perfect equanimity. “Time to Orion intercept.”

Faulwell checked his display. “Four minutes, sir.”

Gold nodded. “Abramowitz, how are we doing for power?”

Abramowitz worked at her console for a moment, then looked over her shoulder at Gold. “Backup phaser generators are starting to fail. Battery reserves are draining rapidly. The computer estimates ninety-one minutes to integrity field failure.”

“Time to Wildfire device detonation?”

“Fifty-eight minutes.”

“Steady as she goes,” Gold said and moved toward Dr. Lense. He attempted to palm the sweat off his face and neck, then gave up and surrendered to his own perspiration.

He watched the numbers parade across Lense's screen.

“How's he doing?” Gold asked. Lense shrugged and frowned.

“Too soon to tell,” she said. “He's only four minutes out. It won't start to get really bad for him for another three or four minutes.”

Gold swallowed the urge to tell her that for Duffy, it was already far worse than she could possibly know.

Gomez's voice crackled over the stuttering comm. “Captain, we're ready to deploy for salvage on your order.”

“Acknowledged. We'll intercept the Orion in just under four minutes. Stand by.”

Gold returned to the narrow space between Abramowitz and Faulwell. The possibilities of the coming hour seemed to stretch out before him, like time extended on the event horizon of a black hole. Twenty-five minutes from now, the Orion's warp core would be recovered and aboard the da Vinci, or it would be lost into the atmosphere. An hour from now, the Wildfire device would detonate, igniting Galvan VI into a small star and vaporizing the da Vinci, or it would be disarmed and left floating derelict and abandoned in a fiery liquid-metal sea...with Duffy by its side, sharing its fate.

The twisted shape of the Orion's secondary hull remained concealed by the superdense metallic hydrogen in which it and the da Vinci were both immersed, but a computer-generated wireframe indicating its position relative to the slowly approaching da Vinci took shape on the main viewer. Gold felt

the gentle tremor in the deck as the ship's braking thrusters fired and guided the *Vinci* in a slow, rolling maneuver beneath the wreckage of the *Orion*.

"Sir," Faulwell said, "we're in position."

Gold keyed the switch for the comm. "Gold to Gomez. Deploy when ready." And God help us all.

* * *

Duffy felt the pressure around him increasing steadily as the plasma thrusters hurtled him downward, toward the core of the gas giant. Minutes earlier, as he had exited the *Vinci*, he had looked back and watched the ship's dim outline quickly disappear into the darkness that now had swallowed him.

He faced forward now, the view beyond his face-plate featureless and black; all he had to look at was his own worried reflection, staring back at him with varying expressions of regret, terror, and growing disorientation.

The rising pressure inside the suit had caused his ears to pop within a minute of leaving the ship; now he could barely hear Lense's voice trying to soothe him over the comm.

"Just relax, Kieran," she said. "Your vitals are all still in the clear. How do you feel?"

He wanted to say, Like an ant being stepped on by an elephant, but he couldn't draw enough breath to force the words from his mouth.

His legs cramped up and began to twitch. Damn, he thought. Only eight minutes out and already I'm losing it. And I've still got more than twenty minutes to go. He concentrated on suppressing the tremors in his legs, but the effort only made the spasms more frequent and severe. Great. Just great.

"Duffy, can you hear me?" Lense said. She sounded like she was speaking through a thick blanket. "I'm reading neurological anomalies in your motor cortex. Your central nervous system is beginning to react to the pressure. Are you all right?"

Duffy struggled to harness a single breath and force it outward. "Okay," he said. It was more of a grunt than a statement.

"Try increasing the suit's integrity field," she said. "And be careful. Now that you've got the shakes, you need to be on the lookout for pressure psychosis. It might manifest as paranoia, hallucinations, or euphoria."

Duffy's ribs started to ache, and he was getting dizzy as his blood pressure climbed. He was sorely tempted to increase the suit's integrity field strength, perhaps just for a few moments. Then he reminded himself the numbers didn't allow it. There was barely enough power to get him to the Wildfire device and spare him five short minutes to disarm it. He glanced at the power-level gauges on his visor's HUD—and was alarmed to realize he couldn't focus his eyes to read them. Wonderful. Now I'm going blind, too.

He closed his eyes and let the high-pitched whine of the plasma thrusters lull him a step closer to relaxing and enjoying his headlong plunge into the abyss.

Look, Mom, he thought, fond memories of his youth springing to mind. I'm flying.

* * *

P8 Blue led the way into the Orion's main engineering compartment, followed closely by Madeleine Robins from security. The room was completely flooded and pitch-dark. A fast scan from the built-in tricorder on P8's suit confirmed that most of the surfaces inside the derelict ship had been scoured bare by the superheated metallic hydrogen.

Lucky for us, a warp core is made to contain matter/antimatter reactions, P8 mused. It has to be tough inside and out. Otherwise, there'd be nothing here to salvage except slag.

She scanned the core and was pleased to find it still intact. She keyed her suit's comm. "We're good to go," P8 said. "Plant the charges in pattern alpha, just like we planned."

P8 and Robins split up and moved toward different points around the upper and lower perimeters of the warp core. Each began planting specially shielded, shaped explosive charges that P8 had fashioned in a matter of minutes from old geological survey mines left over from one of the Vinci's past assignments. P8 had made her best educated guess about the optimal placement for the charges, based on the rapid rate of structural deformation the Orion was suffering.

"No extra points for neatness," Gomez had told her before the salvage team left the Vinci. "Just bring me a warp core."

P8 planted her first charge and primed the detonator.

One warp core coming up.

* * *

Stevens stared out the cockpit of Work Bug Two, straining to see anything other than an unbroken curtain of darkness.

The Vinci was roughly eighty-one meters away from the Work Bug. Inside its main engineering compartment, Gomez and the rest of the salvage team were waiting for the away team to deliver the Orion's warp core.

The Orion, meanwhile, was only a few meters away; the Work Bug was docked to its ventral emergency hatch, yet Stevens couldn't see even a hint of it through the superdense murk surrounding it and the battered-but-sturdy utility craft.

A wireframe image and detailed sensor readings projected holographically onto the windshield gave him highly precise position and relative-motion data regarding the husk of the Orion's engineering hull, but being unable to see the ship with his own eyes gave the entire salvage mission the feeling of a low-resolution hologram, like the piloting simulations used in Starfleet basic training.

Stevens was surprised to find he wasn't alarmed by the absence of normal visual contact; if anything, the oddly virtual nature of the experience put him at ease. Just numbers and a few quick maneuvers I mastered fifteen years ago, he told himself. Nothing to it. . . . Just don't screw up, or else everyone dies.

"Salvage team to Work Bug Two," P8 said over the comm.

Stevens snapped to full attention. "Work Bug here."

“We’re set and coming out. Get ready for some fireworks”

“I love fireworks,” Stevens said, shocked at his own perverse level of cheerfulness as he fired up the engines.

* * *

Two minutes later, P8 and Robins scrambled aboard the Work Bug, squeezing into the narrow space behind Stevens, who was strapped securely into the pilot’s seat. P8 moved to the port side cargo-arm controls while Robins sealed the starboard hatch.

“We’re tight,” Robins said over her suit comm. “Punch it.”

Stevens disengaged the docking clamps and struggled to hold the Work Bug steady as it separated from the Orion. He knew from P8’s rushed pre-mission briefing that his next destination was the Orion’s severely damaged port side.

The shimmering green holographic wireframe image on his windshield rotated slowly as he reoriented the Work Bug and keyed the navigational thrusters. A second, bright-orange holographic diagram appeared, superimposed over the original wireframe. This diagram was P8’s best estimate of the escape trajectories for the various shattered pieces of the Orion’s hull that were about to be explosively separated.

“Watch out for that one on the left,” P8 said.

Stevens snorted in amusement. “No problem,” he said. “I’ve had enough collisions for one day.” He angled the nose of the Work Bug back toward the Orion as he cleared its port side ventral edge. “What’s minimum safe distance?” he said. P8 made a few quiet clicking noises, followed by a low whistle.

“Five-point-one-four kilometers,” she said. “No time. Hold on to something heavy.” Stevens didn’t like the sound of that.

“What do you mean hold—”

The shock waves from the quick succession of blasts made his teeth hurt. Each cacophonous explosion stabbed at his eardrums, and for the first time in his life he became aware of each of his internal organs as he felt them shuddering against one another inside his torso.

He jabbed a finger at the null-field generator control and tried to boost its power, only to discover it was already at maximum. The lights inside the Work Bug hiccuped as the hull was peppered from outside by myriad tiny collisions.

“Forward thrusters!” P8 said over her suit’s crackling comm circuit. “Get in there and match the warp core’s rotation so I can grab it.”

Stevens fired the main thruster and studied the wireframe of the warp core, which now floated ahead of him, tumbling loose in a cloud of twisted duranium wreckage.

When P8 had described this phase of the recovery mission to him, she had made it sound as if the core would be in a slow, regular spin. He had assumed retrieving it would be as simple as approaching its center point, matching the rotation, and adjusting his bearing to parallel the core’s long axis so P8 could

snag the core in the Work Bug's cargo claw.

Ahead of him, the warp core tumbled erratically.

Of course it's not that easy, he thought sourly. It's never that easy. The core was rotating on one axis, spinning on another, and generally wobbling to and fro as a result of random interactions with invisible but immensely powerful currents in the planet's superdense atmosphere.

"Pattie," he said, "this thing's all over the place. I can't line it up."

P8 pushed forward to study the schematics and sensor data. "Well, you could always just give up, let it drift away in the atmosphere, and condemn our only hope of survival to a fiery doom," she said. Stevens growled in frustration and accelerated.

"Stand by on the cargo claw," he said, and pitched the Work Bug into a chaotic spinning tumble in an effort to match the unpredictable movements of the Orion's orphaned warp core. "And hang on, this is gonna get messy."

Stevens tried following the core's tumbling motion, hoping to discern a pattern he could anticipate and intercept. But the core's movements refused to be predicted. He tried to sneak under it, and it rose away; he tried to roll alongside it and ended up narrowly dodging a potentially disastrous collision. As he chased the core in circles, he became painfully aware of the precious minutes the rest of the team were losing while waiting for him. Every second I'm chasing this damn thing is one that Gomez isn't hooking it up, he chastised himself.

He accelerated again and followed the core through another chaotic tumble-roll.

He waited until he saw its balance shift and was certain it would pitch upward to an intercept point.

He forced himself to steer in the opposite direction.

The motion of the wireframe on his windshield was a blur. A jolt shuddered through the craft as the sound of a metallic impact echoed inside the cabin. He was certain he'd rammed the core by accident until he heard a long string of satisfied-sounding warbling noises from P8.

"Got it!" she said. "Nice job. Let's go home."

Stevens confirmed the cargo claw had a secure grip on the warp core, right on the edge of a structural support element that could handle the stress. The odds of getting this right had been astronomical. Until now, he hadn't dared to let himself believe they would actually succeed. Damn it, he thought. Why don't I ever have this kinda luck when I'm playing dom-jot?

He keyed the ship-to-ship comm. "Work Bug toda Vinci. Did somebody order a warp core?"

* * *

Gomez stood in the da Vinci's main engineering compartment, staring down the cylindrical cavity that once held the ship's primary warp core and matter/antimatter reaction assembly. The other members of the salvage team—Ina, Wong, Copper, Wetzel, Soloman, Hawkins, and Conlon—also were grouped around the edge of the artificial chasm, staring down at the darkness beyond its bottom extremity. Only a weak and invisible force field prevented the planet's blistering, liquid-metallic atmosphere from rushing in

and instantly vaporizing them all.

No one moved, and no one spoke. Air had become dangerously scarce aboard the *Vinci*, and had grown as hot and dry as a Vulcan summer. Several crewmembers' nasal passages had begun to crack from dehydration. Gomez seemed to be suffering the most; she wiped away her latest nosebleed from her upper lip and unabashedly palmed the bright-red blood on her pant leg. She was confident no one would see; despite having brought every remaining chemical flare on the ship to main engineering, the room rapidly was dimming as the flares dwindled.

Gomez would have preferred to install a warp core under controlled conditions at a starbase, or, in an emergency, in deep space. Installing the *Orion*'s salvaged core into the *Vinci* here, in the lower atmosphere of a gas giant, without flooding main engineering, would require a real-time adjustment of the core shaft's containment field; it would have to expand outward to envelop the core, then retract with it until it was locked into place. Because the hard connections to the main computer were still offline, it would have to be done manually.

Hawkins had commented the procedure was similar to extending defensive shields around an allied vessel, so Gomez tapped him to be in charge of modulating the force field. At least he's got a job that's familiar to him, she thought as she looked around at the rest of the team.

Except for Conlon and herself, the rest were not engineers. Ina and Wong at least had some advanced technical training; Soloman's help would be critical to adapting the engineering software to the current crisis. But Wetzell and Copper were medical staff; Hawkins was a security guard. Installing a warp core, even just for a basic power supply, was no simple task. It was not a job to entrust to amateurs.

Unfortunately, Gomez thought, amateurs are all we have left. She resolved to keep her instructions short and simple.

"Work Bug to Gomez," Stevens said over the comm. "We're on approach. Standing by to deliver the core."

"Bring it in slow," Gomez said. "Make sure it's lined up."

"Coming in now. Get ready to grab it."

Gomez nodded to Hawkins. "Extend the force field."

Hawkins worked at his control padd. Gomez saw him blinking away exhaustion as he made multiple tiny adjustments.

Gomez and her team stared down into the darkness; several seconds later the warp core emerged, like a phantom rising from an abyss. Unseen generators whined with a rapid oscillation as Hawkins used the force field to pull the warp core up into the shaft. "Stand by," Gomez said. "As soon as it reaches the top, activate the magnetic locks in front of you."

Gomez watched anxiously as the core continued to rise. She kept anticipating a mishap, another catastrophe to compound all they had already suffered in the past twelve hours. But this time she was wrong. The top of the core ascended past her eye level, and climbed steadily upward toward the deuterium injector valves. A few seconds later, there was a dull thud as it reached the top of the shaft. Gomez and her team moved in concert, throwing the switches on the powerful magnetic seals that held the core steady at its central point, just below the dilithium crystal articulation chamber.

The warp core was in place, but there still remained more than a hundred small, finely calibrated steps that needed to be executed, to within vary narrow tolerances, before the core could be cold-started. And, to Gomez's chagrin, the chemical flares were fading faster than she expected, so much of this work would have to be done in the dark. She tapped her combadge.

"Gomez to Work Bug. Good job. Get back here on the double. I need you all in main engineering."

"Acknowledged," Stevens said. "We'll be with you in less than five minutes. Work Bug out."

Gomez gasped for breath in between orders.

"Conlon, get to the top and hook up the deuterium injectors. . . . Hawkins, Copper. Go up one level and secure the next set of magnetic locks. . . . Wetzell, Wong. Go down one level and do the same thing.

"Soloman, restore core control circuits here, at the primary node only. Don't worry about the backups. . . . Ina, reconnect the main EPS tap to the core shunt, over there, behind the dilithium crystal chamber. I'll check the crystals.

"Everyone ask me for more orders when you're done. Go."

Fix the big things first, Gomez reminded herself. Power-related repairs only. She watched her team move to carry out their orders. There still was almost no talking; only a silent, intensely focused concentration that seemed to propel all the members of the team.

Gomez was about to permit herself a swell of optimism when the silence was broken by the deep, agonized groan of the *Vinci*'s hull beginning to implode, one section and bulkhead at a time, starting in the aft sections and progressing forward. The integrity field is retracting, she realized. Instead of an hour, we've got thirty minutes—if we're lucky.

At the moment, Gomez was no longer feeling lucky.

* * *

Falling. . .

Duffy snapped back from a daydream he suddenly couldn't remember. He felt the brutal, crushing hand of the atmosphere relaxing its hold on him. Must be close to the device, he reasoned. Suit's powering up its integrity field.

He could barely hear his own breathing. The prolonged, intense pressure had left his ears ringing and feeling like they were filled with concrete.

He keyed the visor display and saw the tactical readout from the Wildfire device. He was less than ten meters from it and approaching quickly. He waited until he was nearly on top of it before reaching out. He felt his hands make contact, and he grabbed hold of the twisted duranium rod that was still fused to its outer casing. The sole achievement of my last attempt to defuse this thing, Duffy mused as he held on to it.

He fired small maneuvering thrusters on his suit and steadied himself directly above the device's control pad. Only one chance at this, he thought as he noted the suit's power gauges decreasing rapidly. Gotta get it right the first time.

He had completed twelve of the sixteen steps needed to disarm the device during his first attempt aboard the Orion, before a stray blast of lightning had nearly cooked him alive. Now he had only to pry open the casing and enter the final four code sequences directly on the warhead control interface. On the Orion, with no leverage and only his own strength, he'd been unable to force open the device's outer casing. With that in mind, he'd taken the precaution of enhancing the suit's myoelectric components, to amplify his strength far beyond its normal range. Gripping the duranium rod in his left hand, he placed his right against the open edge of the device casing and pushed the two apart.

The device opened easily, giving him access to the warhead control interface. For a moment he saw an outline of the device through his visor, then realized it was probably just a glitch in the visor display, caused either by the immense atmospheric pressure, the extreme heat, or the suit's rapidly depleting power reserves. Or maybe I'm hallucinating.

Duffy entered the final codes carefully but quickly. He wasn't concerned about beating the detonator, which still had nearly twenty-four minutes remaining; he was worried about his suit's impending power failure. By even his most optimistic calculations, if he kept the integrity field at full power, the suit would run out of energy in less than four minutes. At the minimum survival level, he might last another twenty.

He submitted the final disarming protocol for approval. Several seconds later, the device acknowledged the codes and verified it was aborting the countdown and shutting down all its systems. Duffy breathed a relieved sigh as the device's power signature vanished from his suit's sensor display. He gradually reduced the power to his suit's integrity field and boosted the power to his comm as he opened a channel.

"Duffy toda Vinci," he said, realizing for the first time that his suit was less than ten minutes away from running out of air. He'd have to keep this short.

"Go ahead, Duffy," Gold said, his voice sounding distant to Duffy's compromised eardrums.

"Device...disarmed."

* * *

Gold was grateful for any small bit of good news right now.

"Good work, Duffy," Gold said.

"Doc?" Duffy said, his voice quavering oddly. Gold didn't know if it was Duffy's voice that sounded odd, or if it was the transmission that was distorted. "Something's happening..."

Fearful looks passed between Gold and Lense, who had watched helplessly when Duffy's vitals went haywire during his dive toward the planet's core. She stared at her monitor, her eyes focused on a point Gold would have guessed was a kilometer beyond the jumbled scroll of bio readings being relayed sporadically by Duffy's pressure suit.

"What's happening, Kieran?" Lense said.

Gold felt Abramowitz and Faulwell grow tense in response to the troubling silence that followed Lense's query. Then Duffy's voice trembled again over the comm.

“Light...getting...brighter.”

Gold leaned close to Lense and looked over her shoulder at the bio readings. As if I understand any of this, he thought sourly. He muted the comm.

“Doctor?” Gold said. “What’s his status?”

“Vitals are becoming unstable. His CO2 levels are rising.”

Abramowitz turned her seat toward Gold and Lense. “He might be encountering the same phenomenon that Soloman saw,” she said. “He might be making contact.”

“Possibly,” Lense said. “But more likely he’s suffering from pressure psychosis. Captain, we should get him back aboard as soon as possible.”

Gold felt Lense watching him as he stepped away without answering her.

The hull of the *Vinci* howled as another flooded, outer section buckled inward, folding in on itself as the planet’s atmosphere tightened its lethal grip. Gold placed his remaining hand against the unusually warm bulkhead.

I know how you feel, he thought. Part of him wanted to believe his ship could hear him and would take heart. Fight, old girl. Hold together.

Gold moved to the ops console and opened a ship-wide channel. “All hands, this is the captain. Lt. Commander Duffy has succeeded in disarming the Wildfire device.” Gold checked the console’s display. “We have approximately fourteen minutes before we run out of power. Make them count.”

* * *

Gold’s announcement was still echoing off the barren walls of main engineering as Gomez looked up from the dilithium crystal articulation frame.

Fourteen minutes? she thought. Is he kidding me?

Stevens, Blue, and Robins had made it back several minutes ago; she had detailed Stevens to hook up the antimatter injector assembly and Pattie was directing the rest of the nonengineers in reconnecting the electroplasma system to the reactor. Conlon would be finished with the deuterium injector in a few minutes, then would go below to help Stevens. Soloman was promising core control functions in three minutes.

Even with all that done, there would still remain the delicate and potentially disastrous task of manually calibrating and controlling the matter/antimatter reaction process to restart the core. Gomez was ready to do it herself—she was an expert in warp drive engineering—but she would feel a lot better once Duffy was back aboard to help her fine-tune it. He was a propulsion expert, and this was his specialty.

She wiped the sweat from her palm down the side of her jacket and tapped her combadge. “Gomez to Duffy. What’s your return ETA? We could really use a hand up here.”

Gomez looked up and noticed Conlon was climbing down from the deuterium injector. Good. She’s ahead of schedule. A few seconds later she was still waiting for a reply from Duffy. She was about to tap

her combadge again when she heard his voice crackle weakly over the comm.

“I’m sorry, Sonnie.”

Gomez felt the panic rise in her like a wave.

“Kieran? What’re you—”

“I love you, Sonnie.... I’m sorry.”Duffy’s final iteration off’m sorry was drowned out by a rasp of static.

“Kieran?” Gomez’s voice rose in pitch and volume with her fear. “Kieran!”

Gomez was numb. Her breath caught in her throat. She thought of Duffy, alone, swallowed by searing darkness, crushed, vaporized.... She slumped against the side of the warp core. Her jaw trembled and her knees felt ready to fold and deliver her to gravity’s mercy.

No.... Oh, God, no....A sick shudder racked her body. Her throat tightened to hold in a cry of rage and grief. Through the blurred lenses of her tear-filled eyes she noticed that all other activity in main engineering had ground to a halt.

Can’t fall apart,she told herself.If you’re weak these people die. Get up. Get up!

She banished her grief with an angry growl and blinked hard to clear her vision. She sealed the dilithium crystal chamber and glared at Conlon, who seemed to recoil from Gomez, as if grief were contagious. “If you’re done up top, go help Stevens,” Gomez said.

Conlon rushed to the hatch that led to the engineering sublevels.

“Let’s go, people,” Gomez said loud enough to be heard a deck away. “We have twelve minutes to restore main power, and I don’t plan to be late.”

Gomez moved toward the impulse power relay, grabbing up tools along the way. She thought of Duffy, dying alone, and wished she was with him. She paused to look at the other members of the crew, all scrambling to finish repairs they weren’t remotely qualified to make, fighting for their lives.

If it were just my life, Kieran....She let that thought drift away uncompleted. She stepped to the relay, opened it, and began making the fastest, simplest, good-for-now repairs she could think of.But it’s not just my life. These people need me.

She had her orders. She had her duty.

And there would be time to mourn later.

Chapter 8

Falling...

The sky had opened up beneath Duffy. He tumbled downward, spiraling in tight circles beside the

now inert Wildfire device. He felt his weight increase with each passing moment, and his vision had long since blurred.

He was no longer in darkness; all he saw were washes of color racing past him—or perhaps he was racing past them. He sensed he was moving with tremendous speed, even though his pressure suit's plasma thrusters were out of fuel.

Then the sensations changed. The pressure abated. He no longer felt the heat. Lense warned me about this, he remembered. Pressure psychosis. I'm losing it. He wondered which would come first—crushing implosion or asphyxia. He hoped for asphyxia.

He pulled a breath of thinning air into his lungs and struggled to focus his eyes. He was hurtling headlong through a vertical tunnel of multicolored light. He plunged past its spiraling walls toward a bright surface of shifting colors and swirling semiliquid gases.

The multichromatic wall rushed up to meet him. He braced for the impact. Instead, he broke through the luminescent barrier, penetrating it like a bullet.

Duffy emerged into a vast expanse of vacuum, a region of negative space at the heart of the gas giant. The pocket of vacuum was encased in a shimmering, hollow sphere of liquid metallic hydrogen.

At its center was a sphere of light.

The sphere wasn't like a star, or some monochromatic orb; its surface was made up of what Duffy surmised must have been many trillions of individual beams of light with definitive beginnings and endings, collections of coherently ordered light that seemed to be their own source.

Hundreds of colossal tentacles of energy, which reached from the surface of the sphere to the shimmering wall above the vacuum, undulated and twisted around one another; they resembled tornadoes of light and moved in complex patterns that Duffy couldn't help but think of as a dance.

The beams in the sphere and tentacles spanned more hues than Duffy could discern, in shadings and gradations too subtle for him to comprehend. He continued to descend, slipping through a narrow gap in two tentacles as they closed their double-helix into a single strand. He found it difficult to judge sizes and distances without the benefit of his suit's sensors, but he guessed the sphere he was falling toward was at least eight times the size of the Earth.

The surface of the sphere dominated his field of vision; its horizon grew wider and flatter. Duffy felt like he was falling in slow motion as he neared the moment of impact.

He fell into the sphere and sank through its shifting layers of light and energy. The systems of his enhanced pressure suit flickered, then failed.

Duffy was oblivious to the shutdown of his equipment; he was far away, drowning in the deep, swift currents of memory.

* * *

The blades of grass prickled young Kieran's neck as he lay on his back, arms folded behind his head. He stared up at the night sky from his parents' backyard. His father sat beside him, listening proudly and only rarely pointing out minor corrections as Kieran named the constellations.

Only seven years old, Kieran already had memorized most of the stellar configurations visible from Earth with the naked eye, and he was well on his way to learning the stars' names as they were known to those who lived on planets that circled them.

"I'm going to go there one day," Kieran declared. "To all those stars and others you can't even see. I'll see them all."

His father, who admired the stars but had always been satisfied with life planetside, responded by smiling and gently tousling Kieran's mop of light-brown hair.

"Someday, son," he said. "Someday. If you work hard. If you study. If you're both smart and lucky, you might even get into Starfleet."

Kieran gazed longingly at the stars. He wanted to be out there now, flying in the pure, empty space between worlds. School and Starfleet were so long and tedious; thinking about them made the stars seem farther away than he could stand.

His father seemed to sense his eagerness and the disappointment that followed on its frustrated heels.

"When you grow up," he told Kieran in a wise and gentle voice, "you'll find that the stars are an excellent school for patience."

* * *

Duffy plunged through a wispy scattering of clouds tinted pink by the sunset. The gravity boots the lanky teen's uncle had given him for his sixteenth birthday had propelled him skyward for months afterward. Each time Duffy left the ground he went a little bit faster, a little bit farther, a little bit closer to tempting fate.

His mother frequently wailed it would be only a matter of time before he'd go too far, or slam into something and break his neck. His father had been a bit more subtle, nicknaming him "Icarus" over breakfast one morning a few weeks ago.

Duffy wouldn't let their fears hold him on the ground. It felt too good to be free, to be on his own, to make his own rules in a wide-open stretch of sky. Flying without the aid of a spacecraft or even a simple glider, with the air rushing against his skin and through his hair, was about as close a thing to real freedom as the impetuous teenager could imagine.

I should have been a bird, he thought as he soared upward with the wind and sun at his back.

* * *

The German shepherd reared up on its hind legs and was nearly twice Kieran's height. Alone with the beast in his family's backyard, Kieran feared the dog's leash would snap, or that the animal might simply pull up the tree to which it was lashed.

Kieran's father had named the animal Alexander—in honor of Alexander the Great—and it barked and yelped with exuberance born of hunger. Kieran recoiled from Alexander, an exceptionally large and spirited example of its breed. Its eyes gleamed with desperate anticipation for the bowl of foul-smelling dog food that the petrified, nine-year-old Kieran had brought for its dinner but was now too scared to

put down within reach of the writhing bundle of fur and fangs.

The dog had made a truly lasting impression from the first moment Kieran's father had ushered the slobbering beast out of the transport pod and into Casa Duffy. The dog had spied Pearl, the family's ornery, old, white longhaired cat. Pearl always wore an indelible expression of utter contempt for the world. She was a tough old cat who had survived all manner of indignities, and she certainly wasn't keen on sharing her home with a big, smelly dog.

Alexander, for his part, wasn't going to allow some cat to besmirch his new master's abode, and immediately sprang into action. He galloped toward Pearl, barking and flinging saliva with wild abandon. Pearl sat, stoic as a golem, watching Alexander's frenzied approach with cold eyes.

When Alexander dared to push his barking snout into her face, she stood up on her haunches and swatted his wet nose like a Klingon beating a piñata with abat'leth.

The dog yelped like a squeaky hinge and scampered back behind Kieran's father, its head drooped in remorseful failure. To avoid further humiliation for the dog, Kieran's dad agreed to tie it to a tree in the backyard.

Now the dog strained against its tree-tethered leash with such might that Kieran was afraid it would either strangle itself or break free.

Breaking free was what this dog did best. It did it so often and well that Kieran's mother had nicknamed it "the Houdini of dogs." Kieran didn't know who Houdini was, but he guessed he must have been someone who once was good at getting out of things. Within a few weeks of its arrival, the dog had proved repeatedly that there was no chain, no leash, no lock, no fence that could hold it. The only activity Kieran dreaded more than feeding the dog was walking it, because that inevitably led to the slender young boy being dragged through the neighbors' shrubbery just before losing his grip on the leash.

Before long, Kieran's father was forced to admit the dog was too clever and free-minded to be contained in a single backyard. Kieran would always remember the bittersweet look on his father's face the day they delivered the dog to an apple orchard in New England. His father seemed genuinely sorrowful to give up the dog to a new owner, but couldn't hide the joy he felt as he watched the golden canine leap away in long strides, bobbing wildly through fields of tall grass and dodging with lightning grace between stands of Granny Smith and Golden Delicious trees silhouetted against an orange-and-indigo sunset.

As the Houdini dog escaped his last cage, Kieran's father looked down at him with the same wistful expression and tousled his hair. "Come on, son," he said. "Let's go home."

* * *

Duffy stretched his legs out in front of him and curled his toes in the cool grass. He glanced over at Gomez, who, like him, was attired in civilian clothes. It had been a long time since he and Gomez had had an opportunity to wear civvies, been able to shed their uniforms and ranks and just be together.

A cool spring breeze moved across the lawn, silent and gentle, bearing the perfume of new blossoms on the trees. The band playing under the shell beside the lake was spinning out a cool, bluesy jazz number, strong on bass and piano and wire-brush percussion. Groups and couples surrounded Duffy and Gomez on the wide, upward-sloping expanse of well-manicured grass.

Duffy had almost forgotten how thrilling real, live entertainment could be. Like many people who spent long stretches of time on starships or starbases, he had become accustomed to taking his recreation in holodecks. But after dealing with the holographic constructs of the Enigma Ship, Duffy had had enough of holograms for a while.

He looked up at the stars. The constellations looked very different from here on Betazed. He thought of how he had longed as a boy to roam free between those distant points of light in the sky, how romantic the adventure and exploration had seemed. His uncle Jim—who had given him the gravity boots—had actually tried to talk him out of joining Starfleet the following year. “If you want to fly, fly free,” Uncle Jim had said to him. “Being on a starship is being in jail, with the chance of being sucked out into space.”

Duffy had ignored his uncle, and enrolled in Starfleet Academy a year later. He had never regretted his decision. But now he felt it was time to choose a new path.

He reached down and held Sonya’s hand. Their fingers meshed together easily. Everything with her felt that way—effortless and natural. She turned her head slightly and shared a smile with him. He admired the perfect slope of her nose in profile, the warmth of her hand in his, the way her dark curls framed the subtle perfections of her face.

He imagined a new life, one lived not in the cold empty reaches between the stars, but in a place like this—rich and lush and peaceful, far away from the disasters, battles, and emergencies that came with wearing a Starfleet uniform. A life in which he could spend long summer nights listening to music under the stars, with Sonya by his side.

His future became clear to him.

I’m gonna ask her to marry me.

* * *

Second-year cadet Duffy stood at attention, his dress uniform still so new and crisp that it chafed against his skin. The sun pounded down, baking the sweat off his skin and almost blinding him. His mother clung to his left arm, her grip tighter than the jaws of a Kryonian tiger. His sister Amy couldn’t stop crying.

Duffy watched his father’s coffin descend into the ground. Most of the other mourners had already departed for the post-funeral reception. Duffy had insisted on staying to see the coffin lowered so he could toss a handful of dirt into the grave afterward. The funeral director had tried to discourage him, calling the fistful-of-earth tradition “archaic” and “morbid.”

“Try and stop me,” Duffy had said to him.

The coffin settled with a muffled thump into the bottom of the grave. The cemetery worker operating the hydraulics under the casket stepped away to give the family a few moments of privacy. Duffy gently lifted his mother’s fingers from his arm and stepped around the other side of the grave, into the generous shade of a large, Y-shaped tree.

He lifted the dark-green tarpaulin off the mound of cool, black soil heaped next to the rectangular pit. His mother clung with both hands to Amy. Together they watched as he closed his fist white-knuckle tight around a clump of dirt, turned, and extended his arm over the grave.

Duffy let his fist open into a hand.

The shower of dirt rained down and spread, fluid-like, across the dark lacquered wood of the coffin, falling with a finality that Duffy found wholly surreal.

Good-bye, Dad.

* * *

Lt. Commander Duffy was trying very hard not to feel like a fraud during his first real turn in the captain's chair of the U.S.S. da Vinci, but, considering the beating the ship had just taken from the Tholians, it wasn't easy.

All he'd had to do was sit quietly in the captain's seat while Commander Gomez and Captain Gold led an away team into the interspatial rift to retrieve the Constitution-class U.S.S. Defiant, which had been trapped there since 2268.

Then, without warning or apparent provocation, the Tholians had attacked the da Vinci and transformed this into one of the worst days of Duffy's life.

He'd barely succeeded in disabling the attacking Tholian vessel, which had moments ago escaped to rally reinforcements for a rematch with the badly damaged da Vinci. If Domenica Corsi was right—and she usually was—the da Vinci could expect to be surrounded by Tholian battle cruisers in just a few hours.

When the Federation Diplomatic Corps hears about this, my career in Starfleet will be over. If I'm still alive, that is...

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

"Our first priority is to get the Defiant out," he said. "Fabian, reestablish the tractor beam—"

His voice shrank as he stared in shock at the main viewer.

The interspatial rift had vanished, taking with it the captain, the away team, the Defiant...

And Sonya.

* * *

Duffy's muscles convulsed as he continued to pinwheel toward the center of the sphere of light inside Galvan VI.

His jury-rigged pressure suit hung about him like a dead weight. His body was numb. A bitter taste filled his mouth. Dark spots swam across his vision, interrupted by bursts of intense color unlike any he had ever seen before. A low rumble echoed in his bones as much as in his ears.

More fragments of memory flickered unbidden through his mind.

A stuffed toy, his favorite, fell from his three-year-old hand, dropped deliberately out a window. It receded toward the distant ground in hyper-real slow motion.

The light...it's the light...

His collarbone had broken with a sickening wet snap when he ricocheted off the tree. "Just because you're sixteen years old doesn't mean you're invulnerable," his mother said with a wagging finger, before she confiscated his gravity boots for a month.

My memories...the light...

Home on midsemester break from the Academy, Duffy awoke on Saturday morning to the aroma of French toast and bacon cooking in his mother's kitchen....

Young Kieran waited patiently beside the signal beacon, staring at the patch of sky above his parents' backyard....

Running late for an engineering staff meeting aboard theEnterprise, Lieutenant Duffy passed a young woman with dark curly hair in the corridor. She wore the gold of engineering or security. Who's she? he wondered....

It's playing my memories. Like bioelectric recordings.

An intense surge of energy rippled through Duffy's body. His present became distant and obscured, like a coastline shrouded by a gathering fog, until all he was aware of was the continued sensation of falling.

* * *

Lieutenant Duffy strode quickly toward theEnterprise arboretum on deck seventeen. Lieutenant Gomez had invited him to join her for a symposium on exobotany at 1900 hours. She met him outside the aft door to the arboretum, and they walked in to find the enormous tree nursery devoid of other personnel.

"I guess we're the first ones here," Duffy said as the door swished shut behind them. Gomez reached up, and, using her thumb and forefinger, gently turned and lowered his chin toward her.

"Kieran," she said with a smile, "there's no symposium."

She pulled him into their first kiss. Her lips were softer than he could have imagined. Her hand pressed gently against his cheek, then slowly migrated behind his neck to pull him closer.

It was several seconds before Duffy remembered that his arms still worked. He wrapped them around her, thanking his lucky stars that she had made the first move.

* * *

Lt. Commander Duffy's first thought was:Where the hell am I?

His second thought was:Oh my God, I'm blind.

He reached toward his eyes. He felt the blindfold and pulled it off, then wished he hadn't. The bright morning glare stabbed tiny needles of pain through his eyes into the back of his skull. Lifting his arm to block the revoltingly golden glow of sunrise, he examined his surroundings.

Unless he was badly mistaken, he was in the worst room of the seediest hotel on Freyar. Tattered

curtains sagged in front of a grime-encrusted window, outside which shrieking hovercar traffic blurred past. The floor was littered with empty and broken bottles of Romulan ale, Klingon bloodwine, and foul-tasting cheap Ferengi synthale. The matted, dank-smelling carpeting was stained so badly that Duffy could no longer discern its original pattern.

Duffy coughed and spit something out of his mouth that was either a half-chewed fruit stem or a particularly tough insect leg. He lay alone in the filthy bed, his stomach growling with hunger even as his lower intestine gurgled its displeasure with the gluttonous feast he and his new best friend, engineer Fabian Stevens, had wolfed down last night in the hotel bar.

The pair also had made time last night to get filthy stinking drunk, in between losing round after round of dom-jot to a sneaky pair of alien women, neither of whose species the two humans had recognized. Stevens had taken a shine to the redhead, however, leaving Duffy to work his charms on the petite gray-skinned girl. Duffy vaguely recalled something fun happening afterward.

He lifted the bedsheet. He was naked. He sat up and realized just how much his head hurt. Then he noticed that nowhere in the room did he see any sign of his uniform.

Oh, you gotta be kidding me. He grunted as he stood, and groaned as he forced his stiff, aching limbs to shuffle forward. There was only one other part of the hotel room to search.

He opened the door to the bathroom. The stench hit him a split-second after the clamor of a rasping snore. The odor was just bad enough to make him wince, but not enough to make him retch. He glanced at the filthy steel commode, sink, and ancient-style bathtub and hydro-shower. The snoring was coming from behind the closed shower curtain. He pulled it open.

Stevens was sprawled inside the bathtub, also completely au naturel. Duffy stared down at him with a mixture of amusement and irritation. Duffy flipped the shower toggle to its “on” position and opened the valve for the hydro-shower’s cold-water supply. Seconds later, an icy spray sputtered, then streamed out of the shower nozzle, drenching Stevens.

Stevens shrieked like a soprano bat and leapt to his feet, dancing gingerly on his toes for a few seconds before hopping awkwardly out of the shower. Dripping wet and shivering, he wrapped his arms around his torso and glared at Duffy, who turned off the water. “What the hell’d you do that for?” Stevens said through chattering teeth.

“They stole our uniforms,” Duffy said angrily.

Duffy continued to glare at Stevens for several seconds. Stevens struggled to suppress a chortle, but his mouth was already contorting from the effort of holding in his laughter. Duffy was trying to play this straight—he was the ship’s second officer, for crying out loud, and Stevens was an enlisted man—but Stevens’s attempts not to laugh made their predicament even funnier.

Duffy guffawed first, and before long both men had laughed until their stomachs hurt. Exhausted, they sat facing each other—Duffy on the commode, Stevens on the edge of the tub.

“How the hell are we going to explain this to Captain Gold?” Stevens said. He opened their one remaining bottle of Klingon bloodwine and took a swig. Duffy shook his head and took the bottle from Stevens.

“Dunno,” Duffy said, then downed a mouthful of the tart, potent libation. “But if I were you, I’d be more

worried about explaining it to Commander Salek.”

“That’s the problem with Vulcans,” Stevens said, wiping a dark-purple bloodwine stain from his chin. “No sense of humor.”

* * *

Lieutenant Duffy stood at the airlock gate, blocking Lieutenant Gomez’s path. She had a standard-issue Starfleet duffel bag slung over one shoulder. She was leaving theEnterprise.

“This is it, then?” he said.

“Kieran, please,” she said, her tone all-business. “I need to go. TheOberth is waiting for me.”

“I know.” This was a great opportunity for her; he knew that. She had received a promotion to full lieutenant, and because theOberth was a smaller ship than theEnterprise, she’d be on a much faster track to career advancement.

But it killed him to see her go. He wouldn’t admit that to her; it would only make this more difficult, for both of them.

“I didn’t mean to hold you up,” he said. “I just wanted to say good-bye.” He was lying. They had said their farewells more than two hours ago. There was nothing left to say. Except that he had come to the airlock with a half-formed plan to ask her to stay, despite the fact that he knew she’d have to say no.

She kissed him softly on the cheek. “Take care of yourself, Kieran.” She gently pushed past him and walked resolutely down the gangway toward theOberth.

Toward her future. Out of my life.

“Sir, are you going aboard?” The voice came from behind Duffy. He turned to see a stoutly built, middle-aged human, a Starfleet chief petty officer, looking at him. “I have to seal the gangway, sir.” Duffy nodded and moved away down the main corridor. He kept walking until he reached one of the observation lounges.

Duffy positioned himself in front of the twenty-meter-tall transparent aluminum windows and watched silently as theOberth cleared its moorings and powered up its navigational thrusters. The compact starship pulled away from the spacedock and allowed Starbase Control to guide it through the massive space doors.

She’s gone,he thought.She’s really gone.

TheEnterprise was scheduled to remain here at Starbase 67 for nearly a month to undergo major systems repairs following a rather brutal encounter with a quantum filament. Without Sonya, however, Duffy was certain it would seem much longer than that.

* * *

I’m never going to see you again.

The auxiliary shuttle-bay door slid closed, separating Duffy from Gomez. His departure from theda Vinci

was only seconds away. Once he passed through the force field, there would be no coming back. He knew that the chances of theda Vinci and her crew escaping the atmosphere were dismal. He also knew that beating long odds was what this crew did best.

He turned and faced the force field. To step through it, to leap alone into the darkness, would mean releasing his hold on everything and everyone he cared about. His knowledge of what he was about to lose held him back. This would be no accidental death, no calamity met in the spur of the moment.

This was a calculated sacrifice.

Duffy closed his eyes and thought of Sonya.

If I don't go, we'll both die for certain. If I succeed, at least she'll have a chance.

He opened his eyes and faced the darktabula rasa beyond the force field. He imagined all the people and things he treasured as a tenuous clump of cold dirt clutched in his fist, stretched out over a dark chasm. He pictured his fist opening, his handful of dirt falling away in a slow earthen cascade, vanishing into the abyss of time.

Empty-handed, Duffy stepped forward through the force field and surrendered himself to the darkness.

Good-bye, Sonnie.

* * *

Falling...

Duffy felt weightless, disembodied. He listened to his own shallow breathing, which grew weaker with each labored ebb and flow from his desperate lungs. I'm not dead...yet.

He opened his eyes.

He drifted slowly into the center of a hollow space within the sphere of energy. He guessed that this empty space was also spherical, but without a reference point he couldn't be certain. He knew only that he was surrounded by a vacuum, beyond which pulsed an unbroken surface of radiant energy. Logically, Duffy knew he should be alarmed; his air supply was reading empty. His suit was out of power. Suffocation was only moments away. Yet he felt peaceful...serene...unafraid.

They were reading my memories. Duffy sorted through the episodes of his life that he had vividly relived moments ago, as well as countless others that had flickered by so quickly as to be nearly subliminal in their effect. Memories of flight...memories of loss, of separation...of Sonya...

...memories of them. Duffy searched his mind for several newly made memories, hidden in the fractured puzzle of his own past: Life formed on an unfamiliar world beneath a reddish star; a saurian species rose through stages of evolution; they mastered symbolic thought, built civilizations, waged wars; they soared away to the stars; they evolved, as many other corporeal species before them had done, into non-physical beings.

They were giving me their memories as they read mine.

The Ovanim. They call themselves the Ovanim. Duffy marveled at how much the Ovanim had been able

to impart to him in images and mathematical concepts, without ever resorting to spoken words. The Ovanim had long since abandoned physical bodies, and, disdainful contact with physical beings, chose to make their home here, deep within a gas giant, an environment so hostile to corporeal species that they had expected to enjoy their solitude for at least several more millennia. The subatomic legerdemain they'd had to concoct to make this domain a reality was more complex and subtle than anything Duffy had imagined possible.

Too bad I won't live long enough to study it.

The light around Duffy began to dim. He looked around, confused. An image nearly a hundred kilometers tall took shape on the curved inner surface of the hollow sphere in which he floated. The image that formed was that of Galvan VI, as seen from space. Then a new shape appeared—the U.S.S. Orion, silhouetted against the glowing, bluish gray gas giant. The ship disappeared into the planet's atmosphere.

Moments later, the flash of the planet igniting into a nova blinded Duffy. He squeezed his eyes shut, and held them closed until the glare subsided.

He peeked cautiously at the newly forming image. It was a short series of quick images, rendered in what, to Duffy's failing vision, looked like the impressionistic stipple of a Monet painting: Theda Vinci navigating through the hazardous atmosphere; the Work Bugs inspecting the wreck of the Orion; Corsi and the warhead; the collision of the Orion and Theda Vinci ...

Duffy's vision blurred. He struggled to shake off quickly growing feelings of panic and disorientation.

Have to focus... have to fo—

—cus... Duffy snapped back with a start. Passed out. Not much time left.

The image that now towered over Duffy, larger-than-life, was himself, disarming the Wildfire device. The image melted into the likeness of Sonya, shining in violet light as Duffy had last seen her... then it became his air gauge, flashing EMPTY on his visor moments before his suit lost power.

The thoughts that whispered in his mind were not his own.

...disruption... light... death... defend...

I understand, he thought. You defended yourself.

Duffy focused on making himself heard and hoped his efforts now were not futile. This was going to be his last first-contact mission. He was determined to make the best of it.

We didn't know you were here. It was an accident.

...understand... accident... forgiveness... peace...

Yes. We, too, wish to live in peace. We're sorry.

...duffy... rescue... death... sacrifice...

It was my duty. My life for yours.

...understand...grateful.

The images on the inner sphere shifted again. Duffy found himself surrounded by images of Sonya: as he had first seen her that day when he walked past her on the Enterprise; smiling at him as she pulled him into their first kiss; running toward him on Sarindar, sun-browned and scarred but also defiant and fearless and beautiful; laughing hysterically at one of his stories of drunken misadventure; graceful in repose under starlight on the night that he knew he wanted to marry her.

Sonnie...

Duffy drew a pained, shallow breath, then exhaled and felt his life slip away, like a fist opening into a hand.

Chapter 9

Ina was grateful not to be on the bridge right now. I never know what's happening when I'm up there, she thought. All I can do up there is sit and wait. At least down here I'm doing something.

Gomez moved from one person to the next, giving so many orders so quickly that Ina couldn't keep track of them all. Minutes ago Ina's task had sounded simple, but the heat and exhaustion had taken their toll. Can't breathe, Ina thought, battling back an irrational urge to scream. Can't get my hands to follow simple commands. It didn't help that main engineering was growing darker by the minute as the chemical flares expired.

"Mar!" Gomez shouted up at her. "How's that phase adjustment coil coming?"

Ina nodded in reply. "Almost finished," she said over the deafening groans of the ship's buckling spaceframe.

"Step it up, we still have to initialize the power transfer conduit," Gomez said before turning her focus toward Stevens.

Ina finished calibrating the coil and forced herself to climb the ladder to the PTC. Still so much to do, she realized. But at the rate the hull is collapsing... She banished that thought from her mind and moved on to the next task.

* * *

Faulwell sat quietly at the helm. A parade of sweat rivulets meandered through his beard.

He looked to his right, toward Abramowitz, who sat hunched over the ops display, her features dimly lit by the feeble blue-green glow of the console in front of her. To his left, Captain Gold was little more than a dark phantom in the shadows, leaning against the railing, his head drooped and his body sagging from injury and exhaustion.

Faulwell stared blankly at the engine function display, which remained resolutely at OFFLINE. His orders were simple enough: If that readout changed from OFFLINE to ONLINE, he was to press the

blinking green pad on the helm. He was expressly forbidden from touching anything else.

Nothing like a vote of confidence.

He considered mentally composing a letter to Anthony, but the notion of crafting a death note he couldn't send—and wouldn't want to, if he survived—seemed morbid and futile.

Not to mention melodramatic. Anthony always hated when I—

Hates, Faulwell corrected himself. It's not a past tense situation just yet.

Faulwell fixed his attention on the engine function display and poised his hand above the blinking green pad.

And he waited.

* * *

Gomez forced herself to keep moving from one end of main engineering to the other; her legs felt ready to fold with each step. Her every breath was a gasp, hot and toxic with carbon dioxide. All she saw now were indistinct shadows, some of them sprawled unconscious across the deck.

She rotated her attention among the crewmembers who were still conscious as she issued orders, offered suggestions, and lent a hand wherever she thought it would help. Above her, Ina seemed confused and disoriented.

"Mar!" Gomez shouted to the red-haired Bajoran woman. "How's that phase adjustment coil coming?"

"Almost finished," Ina said. Gomez could barely hear her over the shrieks and wails of the *Vinci* hull being crushed by the atmosphere. Only a few minutes before it's all over, Gomez told herself. Can't let them lose momentum.

"Step it up, we still have to initialize the power transfer conduit," Gomez said. Ina nodded her acknowledgment.

If it were just me... The thought dangled incomplete as Gomez pictured Duffy alone, dying imprisoned in his failing pressure suit; the grieving part of her wanted to surrender now and follow him into the darkness. But it's not just me.

She picked up the gravitic calipers and moved to help Stevens finish priming the master EPS control.

* * *

Gold hated the waiting more than anything. More than the heat, more than the stench of death on his bridge, more than the threat of sudden destruction. Starfleet Academy never told aspiring young officers about the impotence of command. In a crisis, a captain belongs on the bridge, they told us—especially when he's missing a hand and can barely breathe.

There was nothing more Gold could do to help Gomez and her team. The light from the bridge consoles was fading rapidly, and Gold found it almost impossible to distinguish the shapes of Faulwell at conn and Abramowitz at ops.

The minutes and seconds stretched on, bringing with them for Gold a floodtide of nostalgic reminiscences.

He thought of his family as he had last seen them, weeks ago. Rachel, his wife, waved good-bye to him from the visitors' lounge window of the starbase; behind her was their son, Daniel, flanked on one side by his adult sons, Matthew and Michael, and on the other by his wife, Jessica. Running amok behind the two young men were their children—Matthew's son Adam had become fast friends with Michael's boy Tujiro. Matthew's little girl, Jacqueline, was busy being fussed over by her mother, Ilana, and Michael's wife, Hiroko.

Daniel's daughter Esther stood with her Klingon boyfriend Khor. Daniel's other daughter, Leah, had not been there that day. Leah had severed her ties with the family nearly fifteen years ago, after her marriage to Suvak of Vulcan. Gold had heard from a former shipmate now stationed on Vulcan that Leah and Suvak had two daughters.

It pained Gold that he had never seen either of Leah's girls with his own eyes; it hurt him worse to see the lingering sadness Leah's estrangement caused Daniel. Daniel was Gold's eldest and had always held a special place in his heart. In many ways Daniel was the spitting image of his father, tempered by the better qualities of his mother. Gold had to wonder now if he had shown too much favoritism to Daniel during his youth. Five other children I sired, how many still talk to me?

It was just bad luck that Gold's first command of a deep-space exploration mission came shortly after his second son, Joseph, had been born. He wished he had spent more time with Joey; he wished he'd had more time with all his kids. He'd tried to atone for his mistakes when Nathan, his youngest son, was born. The attention he'd showered on Nate had only alienated Joey further.

By the time Sarah and Rebeccah had come along, Gold spent so much time away on starships that the two young girls once mistook him for a stranger when he came home on leave. His eldest daughter, Eden, had always seemed distant to him, despite the fact she was his "princess," and that he was as close as humanly possible to Eden's oldest daughter, Ruth, currently expecting the latest in a series of great-grandchildren. As for Eden, Gold hadn't seen or spoken to her in over a year—not since near the end of the Dominion War, after the liberation of Betazed, when most of the extended family had gathered for the funeral of Nathan and his wife, Elaine.

The memory of the funeral was like an open wound for Gold; the merest thought of it stung his eyes with tears. Can't believe I had to bury my baby boy.... Gold reminded himself that his family had been fortunate—many of his friends' families had buried several children each; some had lost entire generations to the war. Gold took comfort in the fact that Nate and Elaine were survived by two wonderful daughters, Danielle and Simone—two strong young women who clearly had been cast from the same mold as their grandmother, Rachel.

Gold didn't remember now how he and Rachel had ever found time to make six children. Those six children had in turn raised nineteen grandchildren, whom Gold and Rachel—Well, more Rachel than I, he admitted to himself—doted on. And now the grandchildren were having children—fifteen so far. Gold had long since lost count of the nieces and nephews his five brothers and sisters had sired, not to mention the grandnieces and grandnephews, and their scions after them.

Like a small army, this family, he thought, with amusement that quickly turned bittersweet. And when do we see each other now? Weddings and funerals. We need to find some other reason to get togeth—

Gold winced at a distorted boom of implosion that was both thunderous and delicate, like a giant's foot crushing a glass sculpture underwater. There goes one of the warp nacelles, Gold realized. As a similar sound rumbled ominously, signaling the destruction of the other warp engine, Gold feared his family's next gathering would be yet another funeral.

* * *

Lense had been unable to stay on the bridge once she'd realized that Duffy wasn't coming back. I tend to the living, she had told herself when she bolted away from the science station.

After she had retreated to the solitude of her corridor full of unconscious patients, she'd realized the real reason she had fled was so that no one on the bridge would see her cry.

She blinked the tears from her eyes and struggled to pierce the darkness. She checked the ampoules' markings by the light of her medical tricorder, and loaded up three full hyposprays of concentrated melorazine.

That should be enough for everyone still on board, she thought. I just hope I can reach everyone in time. . . . No—wrong. She closed her hands around the hyposprays and amended her wish: I just hope I don't need to use these.

* * *

Faulwell stared at the flashing green pad on the helm console. He fixated on it, clung to it as a symbol of his last hope.

The light stopped flashing. It dimmed, flickered weakly for a moment, then went dark—along with all the rest of the bridge stations. No light came from the corridor aft of the bridge. The command center of the ship was dark as a grave.

"Sir?" Faulwell said, unsure how to continue. He swallowed nervously even though his mouth was dry and pasty.

"I know," Gold said quietly from somewhere unseen.

Isolated in blackness, Faulwell heard Abramowitz's shallow, agonized attempts to breathe the stiflingly hot, putrid-smelling air that grew thicker and more rank with every exhaled breath.

He felt a prickly heat spread across his back, dogged by wandering beads of sweat that made him think of insects crawling on his skin.

The ship's outer hull howled like a pack of drowning wolves. Faulwell's knuckles tightened reflexively on the edges of his console. He braced himself for the searing impact of the liquid-metal atmosphere that threatened to surge through the ship in the next few seconds.

The sudden flaring brightness and deafening whoosh still caught him by surprise, and he let out a cry of terror—

—which caught halfway in his throat when he realized the sudden brightness was coming from the bridge's main overhead lights, and the whoosh was the sound of the resurrected life-support system pumping fresh, cool air into the bridge.

“Engineering to bridge,” Gomez said over the comm in a weary monotone. “Partial main power restored. Starboard impulse engine online.”

Faulwell and Abramowitz turned in unison to look at Gold, who stood cradling his handless left forearm. His eyes were closed; his mouth was pursed tight. He nodded slowly. After a few seconds he opened his eyes, swallowed, and spoke slowly and distinctly in a brittle near-whisper: “Good work, Gomez.” Gold looked at Faulwell with a dark and melancholy expression. “Let’s get the hell out of here,” Gold said.

Chapter 10

Captain’s Log, Stardate 53781.3.

At 0441 hours, the *Vinc* escaped the atmosphere of gas giant Galvan VI and assumed a wide orbit around the planet. At 0503 hours we launched an emergency distress beacon. At 0549 hours we received a reply from the Federation starship U.S.S. *Mjolnir* indicating it was en route at maximum warp, with an ETA of approximately seventeen hours, nine minutes.

Gold sat alone amid the jumbled wreckage of his quarters. On the deck at his feet lay the twisted remains of his antique silver traveling clock, a twenty-fifth-anniversary gift from his wife.

He paused in the dictating of his log and reread what he had so far. He dreaded finishing it.

No point putting it off. He resolved to push ahead, and resumed his log entry.

* * *

The final total of casualties is... appalling. Twenty-three of my crew have been killed, and five seriously wounded, including myself. I’ll be assuming responsibility for contacting the families of the following personnel and offering my personal condolences, above and beyond the official Starfleet protocol:

- Bain, Lieutenant (j.g.) Kara—Ops (beta shift)
- Barnak, Lieutenant Jil—Chief Engineer
- Chhung, Alex—Engineer
- Deo, Lieutenant (j.g.) Elleth—Conn (beta shift)
- Drew, Stephen—Security
- Duffy, Lieutenant Commander Kieran—Second Officer
- Eddy, Claire—Security
- Feliciano, Chief Petty Officer Diego—Transporter Chief
- Foley, Manfred—Security
- Friesner, Esther—Security
- Frnats—Security
- Kazzarus, Chief Petty Officer Sa’il—Cargo Chief
- Keegan, Lieutenant (j.g.) Peter—Engineer
- Kowal, Lieutenant (j.g.) Keith—Ops (gamma shift)
- Lankford, Ensign Denise—Shuttle Control Officer
- Lipinski, Andrea—Security
- Loton Yovre—Security
- McAllan, Lieutenant David—Tactical Officer (alpha shift)

- O’Leary, Lieutenant (j.g.) Brian—Engineer
- Orthak—Engineer
- Skernak, Jovun—Engineer
- tai’Mio, Ensign Talia—Engineer
- Weiland, Lieutenant (j.g.) Norma J.—Engineer

I am also submitting the following posthumous commendations:

Kragite Order of Heroism: Lieutenant Jil Barnak, Chief Engineer, in recognition of his quick action, which, although it cost the lives of nearly his entire engineering staff, saved the ship.

Starfleet Citation for Conspicuous Gallantry: Lieutenant David McAllan, Senior Tactical Officer, who sacrificed his life to defend his captain; Stephen Drew, who gave up his life to protect injured personnel and the medical staff; and Claire Eddy, who sacrificed her life to protect the ship from a massive hull breach.

The Federation Medal of Honor: Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, whose noble sacrifice exemplified—

“Gomez to Gold.” The first officer’s voice snapped over the comm, interrupting Gold’s log entry.

“Go ahead.”

“Something’s happening,” she said urgently.

“On my way,” Gold said, tossing aside the tricorder and darting out his jammed-open door.

* * *

The planet pulsed with light, and it was getting brighter.

Gomez was filled with a growing sense of unease as the bridge was bathed in the planet’s ominous glow. In front of her, Wong and Ina, back at their regular duty stations, had the luxury of focusing on their displays instead. Behind her, Hawkins kept his attention squarely directed at the tactical console he’d been assigned, in light of the ship’s three tactical officers being injured or dead. Gomez and the rest of the crew were still attired in their torn, scorched, and stained uniforms, many of which reeked of stale perspiration and dried blood.

Gold stepped quickly but stiffly onto the bridge. He stopped in midstride when he saw the image on the viewscreen.

“Report,” he said to Gomez.

“It began increasing in brightness about two minutes ago,” she said. Gold stepped down into the center of the bridge next to her. The pile of debris that had collapsed onto Gold’s chair and claimed McAllan’s life had been cleared away, leaving only dents and gouges in the deck—and the absence of the captain’s chair—as evidence of the calamity.

“The Wildfire device?” Gold said.

Gomez shook her head. “No, that would’ve been a sudden flash, followed by a shock wave and a shift in the planet’s energy signature. This is...” She looked at the monitor. “Well, we’re really not sure what this is.”

Ina looked up from her display. “Captain, I’m detecting an energy signature moving up through the planet’s atmosphere. It’ll clear the topmost layer in five seconds.”

Gomez stared at the planet, which was now painfully bright to look at. Its surface flared and whited out the viewscreen.

“Compensating,” Ina said as she adjusted the viewer’s settings. A filter cut the glare and made the image tolerable to look at. “Sorry about that,” Ina said. “Most of the automated functions are still offline.”

“That’s all right,” Gold said reassuringly. “Magnify that just a bit, would you?”

“Yes, sir,” Ina said as she enlarged the image. The increase in magnification revealed a latticework of overlapping beams of light composed of hues from across the entire spectrum. Individual beams within the lattice drifted, or randomly appeared or vanished. The overall effect, Gomez thought, was rather like observing a living sculpture with an intricate, almost indescribably beautiful logic to its geometry.

A soft, synthetic chirp sounded on Hawkins’s console. “Captain,” he said, “the planet appears to be directing a signal toward us.”

“What kind of signal?” Gold said. Hawkins worked for a few moments, then looked surprised.

“It’s an unencrypted text message, sir, on a Starfleet frequency.... It appears to be in English.”

Gomez turned toward Hawkins with an expression like an animal caught in a spotlight. She felt a wave of irrational hope surge through her. Starfleet frequency, she thought. English. Kieran.

“Onscreen,” Gold said.

Everyone waited for a few seconds as Hawkins transferred the signal from his console to the main viewscreen. Gomez pressed her palms flat together and held the edges of her hands against her mouth, her thumbs hooked beneath her chin.

“we are... Ovanim... gas planet... our home,” the message read.

Gomez felt her hopes sink. Maybe he’s with them, she told herself. They’ve got his frequency, they know English....

“your ships... accident... warhead... duffy...”

Yes, they know his name, good. Gomez knew she was clinging to a fragile hope, but she didn’t dare let go. They know his name, he must have made contact.

“sacrifice... warhead cold... sorry... grateful... peace”

The word “sacrifice” twisted inside Gomez like a knife.

“Hawkins, send a reply on the same frequency, same format,” Gold said. His voice pitched upward

slightly as he recited the message. “We are the United Federation of Planets.... Warhead.... Sorry.... Accident.... Peace.” Gold nodded to Hawkins, who transmitted the brief reply.

Ina responded to an audible prompt from her console. “Sir, sensors have detected something emerging from the planet’s atmosphere, being rapidly propelled into orbit.” Everyone waited quietly while Ina gathered more data. “It’s the Wildfire device, sir. And I’m reading something else alongside—” She looked up, alarmed. “It’s Duffy.”

Ina magnified the image on the main viewer to reveal Duffy in his modified pressure suit. He drifted through space, floating beside the inert warhead on a slow journey toward the *Vinci*. There was no sign of activity from his suit’s thrusters, no independent movement.

Even before Ina spoke, Gomez felt the bad news coming, like an ill wind preceding a storm.

“No life signs, Captain,” Ina said in a soft voice.

* * *

Gold stood near the back of the auxiliary shuttle bay, surrounded by nearly all the surviving crewmembers of the *Vinci*. To his right he saw Corsi, back on her feet, leaning on Robins’s shoulder. Faulwell, Blue, Soloman, and Abramowitz huddled together off to his left. Directly in front of Gold were Lense, Wetzel, and Copper, awaiting the call to service, medical supplies slung at their sides. Gomez stood alone in front of the others, her arms clutched anxiously to her chest.

Gold had left Ina in command as he followed Gomez off the bridge. Hawkins and Wong had remained at their stations, as had Conlon, who was alone in main engineering. Now, as Gold watched Work Bug Two slowly approaching the *Vinci* shuttle bay on a return trajectory, towing the Wildfire device behind it in a tractor beam, he envied them for their absence.

Clutched in the Work Bug’s cargo claw was Duffy, motionless inside his now-depleted pressure suit.

* * *

Stevens adjusted the Work Bug’s energy signature so it would pass directly through the shuttle bay’s force field. Lense, Wetzel, and Copper waited on the other side of the invisible energy barrier, standing by to do everything they could for Duffy, who was held securely in the cargo claw.

As the Work Bug cleared the shuttle bay force field, its sensors still showed no life signs from inside Duffy’s suit. Stevens completed the landing sequence, and the Work Bug touched down on the deck with a gentle bump, followed by a dull thud as the Wildfire warhead came to rest on the deck behind it.

Through the cockpit windshield he saw Lense rush toward Duffy, Wetzel and Copper right behind her, each of them clutching an armful of medical supplies and equipment.

He carefully lowered Duffy’s pressure suit to the deck, then released it from the cargo claw. Wiping the tears from his face, he opened the starboard pressure hatch.

* * *

Lense and Copper released the safety seals on Duffy’s pressure suit and began pulling it away in pieces—helmet first, then the breastplate, followed by the arms. As soon as his helmet was off, Lense

was dismayed by the prominent, dark-purple petechial hemorrhages that marred the sandy-haired second officer's face and neck—classic forensic evidence of suffocation.

Wetzel put the cortical stimulator in place on Duffy's temples and began administering pulses of energy directly into Duffy's brain and central nervous system. Copper scanned Duffy with his medical tricorder, then shook his head at Lense. He showed Lense the medical tricorder's display. Not only was Duffy not responding, his body was close to entering the early stages of rigor mortis.

Lense looked over her shoulder at Gomez, who stood only a few meters away. The first officer was hugging herself and rocking slightly, her eyes rimmed red with exhaustion and tears. She looked more fragile than Lense had ever seen her.

Lense turned back to Wetzel and Copper. "Seventy cc's tricordrazine, prepare for CPR," she said. Wetzel handed her the hypospray. She injected it into Duffy's jugular, then placed her hands at the base of his sternum and began compressions. Wetzel tilted Duffy's head back and checked his airway. After every eighth compression by Lense, Wetzel drew a deep breath and forced it into Duffy's lungs, mouth-to-mouth.

Lense continued compressions until Wetzel gasped for breath. Copper discreetly showed Lense the medical tricorder's readings, which indicated no positive change. She steeled herself, then turned and looked back at Gomez.

Gomez met her stare and read the awful truth in Lense's eyes. Gomez began to tremble violently.

"I'm sorry," Lense said.

Gomez backed away, tears welling in her eyes.

* * *

No, he can't be...not like this...

Fabian Stevens didn't want to look any longer; he couldn't stand the sight of his best friend's body lying on the deck. He slumped forward against Work Bug Two and cried into his hands. The hard, choking sobs left him unable to breathe.

He felt a hand on his shoulder.

He turned to see Corsi, her hair falling in unkempt tangles over her shoulders. Her face mirrored his own, and he saw in her eyes an empathy and tenderness even deeper than the one she had shared with him one lonely night months ago.

She ushered him into her arms. He surrendered himself to her embrace and wept into her shoulder.

* * *

Gomez shook her head, sinking deeper into denial with every backward step she took away from Duffy's corpse.

One tear rolled down her cheek, then another. She felt a scream of rage and anguish build inside her throat. She pressed a hand to her lips—as if that meek gesture would be enough to dam up her ocean of

grief. Her pulse throbbed in her ears.

She was beyond words. Her entire body quaked with a terrible, inchoate fury and sorrow. She was hollow, aimless, adrift. She felt Faulwell's hand gently touch her arm in a futile effort to offer comfort. She shook it away with an anger that made the older man recoil and take two steps back.

The small cluster of people behind her parted as she passed through them toward the exit. Her eyes stung, but remained fixed on Duffy's body, which grew smaller in her field of vision as she retreated, the image searing itself into her memory. She backed into the corridor and saw his body framed in the outline of the doorway.

She forced herself to close her eyes and turn away. She opened them to see Captain Gold standing in the corridor in front of her. Your fault, she fumed, and glared accusingly at him. All this is your fault. She pushed roughly past him and stormed away, deserting the captain in her bitter wake.

* * *

Gomez sealed the maintenance lab door behind her. All she wanted was to hide in the sanctity of her own quarters, safe behind closed doors, but that was impossible now. Her private quarters had been destroyed during the final series of implosions that had rocked the *Delta Vinci*.

All her personal possessions aboard ship had been lost to the atmosphere of Galvan VI: her civilian clothes; an antique, leather-bound twenty-first-century edition of *The Complete Works of Richard Brautigan* that her father had given to her when she was fifteen; the sonic rifle she had wielded in her battle against a crystalline killing machine on the planet Sarindar.

And the pens, she realized with a pang of regret. Duffy had given her a set of Vulcan calligraphy pens for her birthday three months ago, because six months earlier she had happened to mention she was interested in taking a class in written Vulcan. He had often surprised her with small, unexpected gifts: a small pendant adorned with an emerald, her birthstone; a music crystal that played Trill lullabies; a bottle of rare Deltan perfume....

Now they're all gone...everything he ever gave me....

She palmed the tears from her cheek and wiped her hand across the front of her uniform. Her fingertips paused on the raised edges of the ring that was still tucked safely within her jacket's inside pocket.

She took out the ring and watched flickers of light dance across its stone's facets as she turned it in her hand. She let the ring fall into her palm and closed her fist around it.

Her first sob caught in her chest. Her second burst out of her like a hacking cough. Then her grief escaped in full force, a throaty dirge that echoed off the metallic walls of the cramped maintenance lab. She pressed her back to the wall and slid downward as her knees buckled. Her wails of despair became angry screams.

She tightened her fist around the ring until the stone bit into her flesh. No sound she made, no pain she inflicted on her body, could ease the torment seething inside her. She slumped to the deck, then curled into a fetal position. She opened her fist and looked at the ring, which was daubed with her own blood. Although she had no idea why she was doing it, she slipped the ring onto the third finger of her left hand.

She stared through her prism of tears into the cold fire of the diamond, as if it held the secrets of life and

death.

Her funereal cries grew steadily more despondent as the truth took root in her mind:

Kieran's gone.

THE END

About the Author

David Mack is a writer whose work for Star Trek spans multiple media. With writing partner John J. Ordo, 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 Ordo also penned the four-issue Next Generation / Deep Space Nine crossover comic-book miniseries *Divided We Fall* for Wildstorm Comics. With Keith R.A. DeCandido, Mack cowrote the Star Trek: S.C.E. two-part novella *Invincible*, currently available in paperback as part of the collection titled *Star Trek: S.C.E. #2—Miracle Workers*. Mack's solo Trek writing includes the *Star Trek: New Frontier Minipedia* and the trade paperback *The Starfleet Survival Guide*. He 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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