

A risky salvage operation brings the galaxy to the brink of war!

STAR TREK

S.C.E.

#4

INTERPHASE

Part One of Two



Dayton Ward and Kevin Dilmore

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

INTERPHASE BOOK ONE

Dayton Ward & Kevin Dilmore

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Nostrene could sense the tension permeating the room, though he himself refused to display any outward indications except that of perfect calm. His posture contrasted with that of his crew and the scientific advisors bustling about the command deck as they made last-minute adjustments or ran final tests. Consoles and viewscreens displayed a vast array of data, each one dedicated to some facet of the monumental experiment currently under way.

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

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of the same excitability and enthusiasm he himself

had at that age.

Report current status, Dlyax. In response, one of the scientists stationed near the front of the command deck turned to face Nostrene, the deep red hue of his crystalline body reflecting the harsh illumination emitted from the deck plating.

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

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

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

This concern had been brought to the forefront during the recent war between the Federation and the Dominion. Alpha Quadrant forces had nearly succumbed to the might of the so-called Founders and their legions of genetically engineered soldiers, the JemHadar. The Assemblys tenuous state of peace with the Federation had strengthened during the conflict, allowing the Tholian people to largely observe the war. That position fit securely with the nonaggression pact they had established with the Dominion. Though it had not been popular opinion to state publicly at the time, Nostrene was certain that Tholian forces would have fallen quickly to the vastly superior strength exhibited by the Dominion.

Fortunately the war had ended, with the Founders and the JemHadar being forced back into Gamma Quadrant space before his suspicions could be tested. Such concerns could soon be put to rest, however, should the experiment they were conducting here today prove successful. Tholian vessels would be

regarded as among the fastest in the Quadrant. Additionally, the ability to channel newly harnessed stores of power would lend additional strength to the defenses and armament of their ships.

Satisfied with Dlyax's report, Nostrene said, "Very well, resume acceleration."

As he gave the order, his eyes shifted from screens displaying information transmitted by the ship's network of sensors to the command deck's main

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

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

"Plus one," the helmsman said. Continuing to accelerate. Except for the subordinates' reports of the ship's progress, all else was silent on the command deck as engineers and scientists continued checking the telemetry fed to them by the ship's sensors. This was the easy part, in actuality, with the difficult tasks yet to come. First the ship had to accelerate successfully to its uppermost obtainable velocity. Then endurance tests would begin as the crew determined how long the ship could sustain that measure of speed. If those experiments were successful, then the celebrations would begin in earnest, and merely wary adversaries would now have reason to fear the Tholian Assembly.

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

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

Moving toward the forward stations, Nostrene

replied, ~~What is causing it?~~

The scientist was keying commands into his con-sole and studying the rapidly shifting patterns of light on his suite of monitors. I cannot ascertain the cause. All systems are functioning normally, but there is an unexplained power drain in the drive system. For a moment, Nostrene was worried that the ship might be rendered inert in space. How serious is this drain?

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

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

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

Now what? Was the entire ship falling apart?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

is physically deteriorating.

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

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the first place.

Put that area on the main screen, he ordered.

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

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

There, the helmsman said, pointing at the screen.

Upper left quadrant.

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

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

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

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

I am detecting spiking radiation levels coming

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

Is there a danger to the ship? Nostrene asked.

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

Commander!

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

energy appeared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

A ship.

Sensor readings?

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

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

Behind him, his weapons officer confirmed his suspicion.

Commander, our tactical database identifies

it as a Federation Constitution-class starship.

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

Are there any indications of other ships in this

area? Both the weapons and sensor officers replied

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with negative reports.

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

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

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

Such judgments, though, were not his to make.

We must report this discovery, he said finally.

They will know best how to proceed.

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As he traversed one of the numerous corridors of Starfleet Headquarters, Captain Montgomery Scott felt as though red-alert klaxons were sounding but only he could hear them. His eyes couldnt help but be drawn to officers mingling or casually going about their business. He returned a few polite nods but didnt stop to talk or even smile back when their glances met his. There was no time for niceties.

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

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

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Briefing Room 23 immediately.

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

The question went unanswered. Ill tell them youre

still on your way, sir.

Scott out. He sighed as he severed the connection.

Whatever it was that awaited him in Briefing Room 23 must be important indeed to have his assistant page him twice in as many minutes.

Probably some politician with his nose all out of joint.

Scotty didnt break stride as he turned toward a pair of doors that parted at his approach. As he entered the briefing room, the first person he saw was a man wearing civilian clothes and the puckered expression he normally associated with a typical Federation diplomat.

Ach. Some days it just doesnt pay to get out of bed, he thought as he braced himself for what was sure to be a long day. As he made his way to one of the empty chairs surrounding the conference table, Scotty put on his admirals smile. It was the one that allowed him to bite the inside of his cheek when a politician inevitably said something to irritate him.

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

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rich blue skin contrasted sharply with the dark colors of his uniform. Scotty decided that the commander, like a growing number of officers he ran into these days, looked like hed just graduated from the Academy.

Does his mother know hes playin Starfleet?

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

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

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

and people in peace and in war, and he had earned the trust of those he led.

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

It gave him a wisdom shaped by experience that

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Scotty usually found lacking in other officers in similar positions. It also made Ross in high demand at Starfleet Headquarters, especially during critical situations.

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

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

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

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

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

The assignment had come as part thoughtful gesture and part impassioned plea, with the admiral seeing a singular opportunity to take advantage of Scottys vast experience and unique perspective. After all, how many other officers could lay claim to having served aboard Starfleet vessels more than a century ago?

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

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suspended in a transporter beam for seventy-five years, Scotty had flirted with self-pity at being removed from his friends and loved ones by nearly a century. It hadnt taken him long, however, to embrace this new era and all the challenges it presented.

The offer from Ross had come soon afterward, but Scotty really hadnt needed an invitation to return to Starfleet. In his heart, he had never truly left.

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

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

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

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

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

Ross didn't rise to the baiting. Sir, Starfleet has not authorized any vessel to enter Tholian space. This incident was a complete surprise to us, just as it should have been. The ship in question hasn't seen active duty since stardate 5685.5.

The date struck Scotty with the intensity of a physical blow. All of the puzzle pieces fell into place as the completed picture became clear to the seasoned engineer. The Defiant, he said, his voice almost a whisper.

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

they stop teaching history at the Academy altogether,

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

Ross couldnt suppress a smile. Gentlemen, in 2268 the Constitution-class U.S.S. Defiant was lost with all hands when it traveled into an interspatial rift in an area of space subsequently claimed as a territorial annex of the Tholian Assembly. According to the Tholians, the rift reopened two weeks ago, and the Defiant has been scanned drifting in and out of it nine times since its initial reappearance. The average duration of its visibility is three hours and twelve minutes, though the intervals are by no means consistent. In more than a century, just one Federation star-ship has encountered the Defiant since her disappearance. That ship had the only opportunity to learn what happened to the ship and her crew. Ross indicated Scotty with a gesture. Were just lucky enough to have a member of that ships crew with us today. Steely blue eyes fixed on the engineer.

Scotty, do you want another crack at her?

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

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

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

Constitution-class ships held a special place in his heart, as such a vessel was where Scotty had served his first tour as chief engineer. The fleet museum contained a Constitution, and hed traveled there many times in recent years. He enjoyed walking the decks or inspecting the bridge and, on rare occasions, treating himself to the warm familiarity of her engine room. Her powerful warp engines may have been silenced long ago, but Scotty could close his eyes and

almost hear their comforting throb of power. Hoping his voice wouldn't break, he said. Aye, that I do, sir.

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

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

This was relayed to us from one of our Epsilon
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deep space reconnaissance stations that was retasked to monitor the region, Ross said. We've no reason to believe what we're seeing isn't authentic.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But the Tholians aren't a patient people, and they're already complaining that we're taking too long. Given the difficulties we're likely to encounter during the mission, both technical and political, it's vital that whomever we send to lead this mission be an innovative thinker as well as a level-headed diplomat. There are two ships with S.C.E. detachments in range of the Defiant: the *Musgrave* and the *da Vinci*. Your opinion? I'd send the *da Vinci*, sir, Scotty said. Captain Gold has the temperament to handle the Tholians, and if anybody can get the Defiant out of that mess, it's Commander Gomez and her team.

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

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

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

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

Not that the mess hall of the U.S.S. *da Vinci* was the

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

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

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

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

Got a minute to sit?

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

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

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

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

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

Step aboard history?

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Gomez snickered, but only good-naturedly. Captain David Gold was an even-tempered man who rarely allowed his emotions free rein. But the news that the da Vinci crew had been assigned to recover the Defiant had sent the captain into a near fit of excitement. History, mystery, and legend all converged on

the area of space the da Vinci was rapidly approaching, and Gold had made no apologies for wanting to be the first one there.

He hasn't been this keyed up for a mission in a long time, has he? Gomez asked. He's acting like an ensign on his first assignment. But to answer your question, we're ready. The captain's been at my side almost every minute since the initial briefing. She grinned mischievously. I did manage to shake him, though.

And your lucky successor was?

Why, Carol, of course. She's got her hands full dealing with our Tholian escorts, but I don't think it's helping with the captain talking into one ear while she listens to the Tholians with the other.

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

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

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

Uh, maybe not.

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

Meaning?

Gomez stared at him until he met her gaze.

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

Sonnie, I'm begging you, Duffy deadpanned as he grasped her free hand, don't take the mission. How will I ever explain to the kids why Mommy never comes home for dinner anymore? You and your dare-devil plans. You don't see the looks I get from the other guys at the tongo club every week. He gave her a grin.

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

Pardon me for trying to connect with you.

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

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for every one of you who are beaming over to the Defiant during interphase. But whatever works out . . . here, well, I think weve both been around long enough to know the risks and costs to our personal lives.

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

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

Kieran, youre sweet, she said, choosing her words carefully. But that wasnt what I meant at all. Duffy straightened in his chair, the brush-off sting-ing him almost as much as it used to back on the Enterprise. Determined to save the moment, he quick-ly fumbled for a witty retort.

Oh, well, this has got to be the first time in my life Ive misunderstood a womans intentions. Was it enough of a cover?

He should have known better.

It seems we have a new issue on the table. Gomez drew a breath only to giggle again, but quickly rallied to maintain her bearing. I cant say I havent missed this kind of talk with you, but we really dont have

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

Consider it frozen, he said, almost too quickly.

For now, he added to himself.

The pause in their conversation threatened to become too long, but then Gomez pressed forward. What I wanted to know was how youre planning for your end of the mission.

Duffy shrugged again and sipped from his glass, hoping to avoid looking Gomez directly in the eye. He

felt certain that, had she looked hard enough, she would see through to the doubt he hid within him.

He hoped to sound nonchalant. Seems pretty cut and-

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

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

Oh. It seems pretty cut and dried, he finished as they proceeded down the corridor. You guys have the hard part in prepping the Defiant. Im just minding the store.

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

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

Ive never even recorded a captains log entry.

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

Was his attitude merely avoidance? Or was it fear?

Even he didnt want to plumb for the answers to

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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the tables end opposite Captain Gold.

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

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

Duffy almost laughed aloud at the thought of Sonya actually telling the captain he should sit this one out.

Sir, Gomez began, Im counting on your knowl-edge of that class of starship to help once we get there. Youre hardly just a sightseer, and Im going to put you to work.

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

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

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Consulting her padd, the Nasat said, Everything we have gathered through long-range scans corrob-orates the data provided by the Tholians. The Defiant, for all intents and purposes, exists simulta-neously within our universe and another. The ship is drifting in a rift between the two. As it moves in and out of this rift, it appears to lose molecular cohesion. Consoles, deck plates, everything on the ship gives up its physical qualities in one universe to regain them in the other. We will have to exercise extreme caution while moving around over there. I cannot be more precise, as this is as much as I have been able to determine from the data available to us. Many pardons.

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

Elizabeth Lense leaned forward in her chair. Ive reviewed the medical logs from the Enterprise and determined that we have two issues to deal with.

First, those of us on the Defiant will get the full expe-rience of interphase, which is sure to bring on nausea and dizziness, muscle weakness and slowed response times to all outside stimuli.

Duffy couldnt help himself. Sounds like what hap-pened to me after breakfast.

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

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learned from the En terprise logs, the humanoids

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Century Klingon biochemical warfare and their use of theragen as a nerve gas, one quickly and painfully deadly to humans. Not an honorable way to fight a foe, Duffy believed, but times were different then.

Gold laughed aloud, as did Gomez and the others in the room. Mr. Duffy, Dr. Lense has assured me that it's merely a derivative. It's perfectly safe and may even carry a slight intoxicating effect.

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

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

needed another moment to simmer.

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

I will report any irregularities at once, Doctor.

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

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

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

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

Thats hardly an order, Commander, said Gold and smiled. You have no idea how much I want to hear the answers to our questions about the Defiant in the words of Captain Blair himself.

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

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

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

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

go, Commander.

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

Carol, what's your take on the Tholians at this point?

Carol Abramowitz shrugged her shoulders just a bit as she drew in a breath. This is my first time dealing with a Tholian who wasn't a training hologram. My contact on the Tholian ship is curt bordering on rude, guarded with information beyond any specific requests, and quite snippy when I don't report regularly and precisely according to his timetable. She shrugged. In other words, business as usual.

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

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

Captain Gold? This is ahead of schedule, but were

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in visual range of the rendezvous point.

Gold answered, We're on our way. Duffy turned to catch the captain's eyes widening and a hint of a grin creeping across his mouth.

Duffy was one of the first to step onto the bridge, only to stop in his tracks and fixate on the da Vinci's main viewer. A pair of hands on his shoulders guided him to one side and without looking he could tell the touch was Sonya's. At any other time he might have reacted or commented on her touch, but his attention was riveted to the viewscreen and the captivating image cast upon it.

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

The low number bespoke the antiquated status the vessel held, Duffy knew. Here was a vision straight out

of history, a physical manifestation of the challenges and adventures that had more than likely inspired every member of the da Vincis crew to enter Starfleet and see what mysteries the universe held for them-selves.

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

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

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

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

Away team, to the transporter room, Gold said.

Its time to go to work. Mr. Duffy, you have the conn.

Take care of my ship.

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

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

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

For better or worse, the bridge was his.

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

No gravity, she said, confirming her suspicions that many of the Defiants systems would be off-line or without power. That was to be expected, of course.

Not even considering that the ship had been out here for over a century, log reports from the Enterprise had described the draining effects of the rift on their own power systems. It made sense that after so many years, the unprotected Defiant would have ultimately succumbed to the influence of spatial interphase.

The only illumination in the engineering section

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