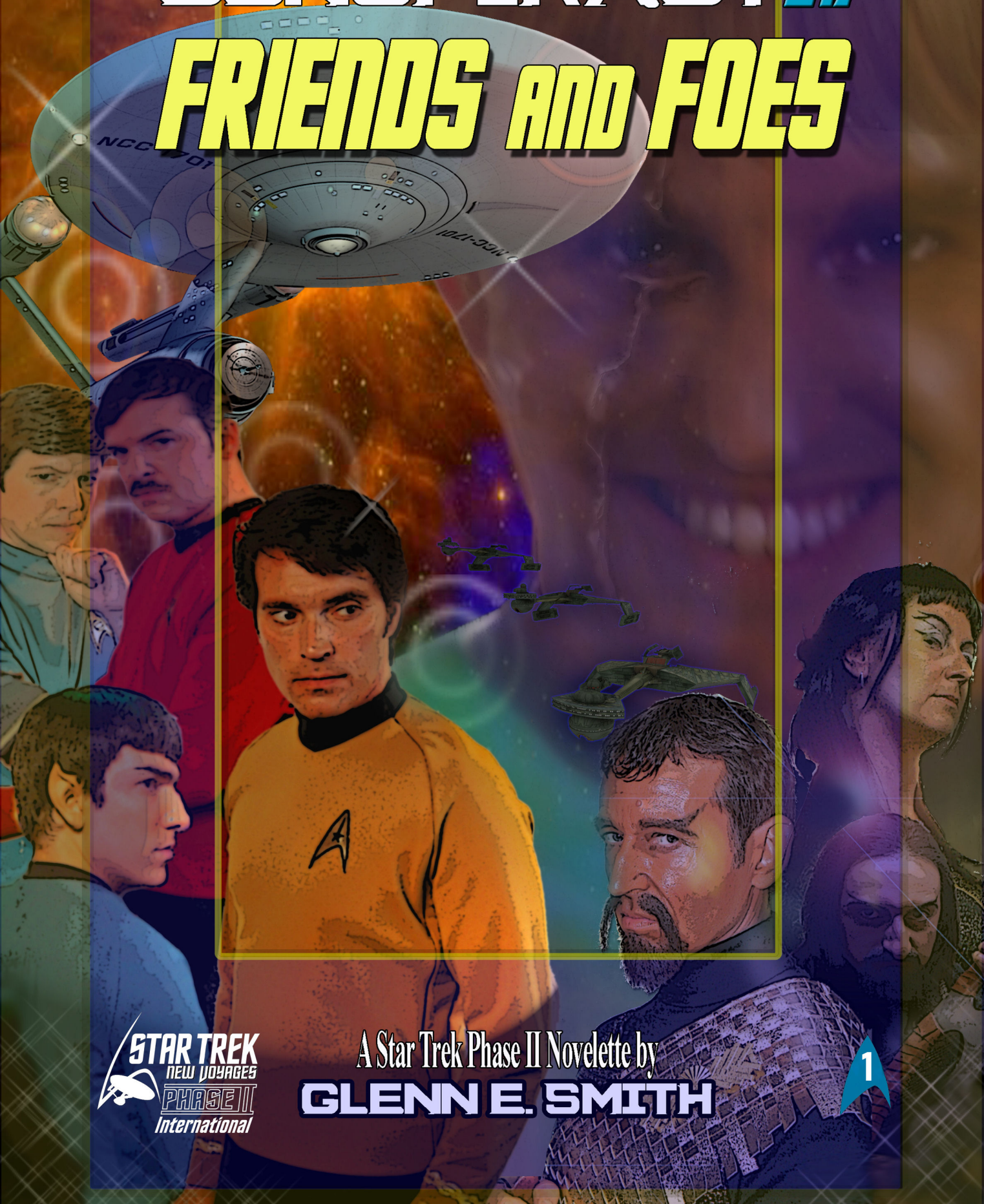


STAR TREK PHASE II CONSPIRACY

FRIENDS AND FOES



STAR TREK
NEW VOYAGES
PHASE II
International

A Star Trek Phase II Novelette by
GLENN E. SMITH

1

Star Trek Phase II:
Conspiracy
Part 1
"Friends and Foes"
Glenn E. Smith

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The following events take place several weeks after the live-action episode

“***Blood and Fire***” www.stnv.de/baf

and shortly before the live-action episode

“***Enemy: Starfleet***” www.stnv.de/esf

CHAPTER 1

Personal Log, Captain James T. Kirk, stardate 6471.2: After all these weeks in space dock, things are finally looking up where the Enterprise is concerned. Mister Scott did warn me the repairs wouldn't last for very long, but I had no idea at the time just how extensive the damage was. I'll have to thank Kargh personally for that if I ever get the opportunity. Our run for Starbase Six cost us our starboard nacelle again...for good...and as a result we were forced to travel much of the way on impulse power only. Long-range communications were offline and decks four and five starboard vented most of their atmosphere along the way, despite Mister Sentell's attempts to maintain force fields around the damage, and we had to seal them off. Despite all of that, however, the old girl came through for us again. Battered, bruised, and crippled...but never beaten...the Enterprise brought us safely home once more. And now, thanks to Commander Scott's whip-cracking, repairs continue at near warp speeds. As expected, the entire starboard warp nacelle had to be replaced, necessitating a complete overhaul of the port nacelle in order to ensure proper field balance, which added another week to our layover...on top of the three weeks it took to install the new warp drive. But, Scotty tells me that as a result the warp drive will perform better than ever now. I guess we'll find out soon enough.

A new warp core, a new matter/anti-matter intermix chamber, a new plasma transfer conduit. Essentially, an all-new warp drive system, ready for the next generation of nacelles to be installed, whenever Starfleet Command got around to deciding the time was right. In the meantime, thanks to that Klingon bastard Kargh and his new *K'Tinga*-class battlecruiser, they'd had to replace one nacelle and overhaul the other, adding more than a week to the job. Nevertheless, Chief Engineer Lieutenant Commander Montgomery Scott had spent the last several weeks grinning from ear to ear in engineer Heaven—on the inside, where no one could see—and now, finally, his beloved ship was almost ready to return to the stars.

With a number of his men and women hard at work around him, integrating the new systems, bringing some of the secondary systems online, running diagnostics, and whatnot, Scotty stood in front of a control panel in the newly upgraded and temporarily less than tidy main engineering section and gazed at Lieutenant Edgar Ross' image on the comm. screen. Ross could be a real klutz sometimes, but he'd proven himself to be an exceptional engineer, so Scotty had put him in charge of the work going on up in impulse engineering, and the two of them had necessarily kept in frequent contact throughout.

"And dinnae forget, lad," Scotty told the lieutenant for the umpteenth time. "The main injectors have to be linked in through the new duotronic-two circuits so we have control in both sections."

"Yes, sir, I'm on top of that," Ross replied. "We've also realigned the impulse flow regulators in accordance with your new specs, and their overall efficiency has increased to almost eight percent above fleet standards as a result."

“Excellent, Mister Ross,” Scotty responded, grinning with pride. “Did yeh double-check the flow sensors’ alignment against the regulators as well afterwards? We dinnae want our increased efficiency to overload the impulse drive and blow the ship in half, do we?”

“No, sir, we certainly don’t, and yes, sir, we did. And Ensign Kirk reports he finally got the mix ratio to settle and maintain at one-to-one. He worked on that for almost seventeen straight hours, just so you know.”

“Seventeen hours?” Scotty exclaimed. “Ach...that lad is gonna work himself into a coma if he’s nae careful.”

“Well, thanks to him we’ll be ready to test-energize the crystals as soon as the pylons are locked into place and the energy conduits are magnetized.”

“Good. I wanna ensure the energy flow remains steady at capacity when we channel the warp plasma. How are the energizer units on the impulse decks coming along?”

Ross sighed and seemed to deflate just a little. *“Sorry, sir. Those are going to take a little longer. The damage...”*

“Aye, those Klingon bastards did a bloody number on ‘em all right,” Scotty replied with understanding. Ross’ answer had been exactly the one he had expected.

“Not to worry though, Mister Scott,” Ross continued, suddenly seeming much more positive and upbeat. *“By the time we finish all this, even the bowling alley will be running more efficiently.”*

Scotty grinned. “Promises, promises, Edgar,” he teased. “Just make sure the place still has all its pins.”

“Hey, Scotty... It’s me, remember?”

“Aye, I know. But this far into a job yeh’re usually half blown up and restin’ in Sickbay already, so I have to wonder.”

“Oh, now that hurts, Commander,” Ross told him as a pained expression crossed his features.

Scotty snickered. “Just bustin’ yer crystals, lad. I want to power up the injectors at fourteen-hundred tomorrow. Can yeh be ready for that?”

“We’ll be ready, sir.”

“Excellent. Scott out.”

Scotty closed the channel and the monitor went dark. He turned and gazed at the new plasma conduit—dark for now, but not for too much longer. Soon. Soon they’d power up the warp drive and the conduit would come alive, lighting the whole area as plasma raced from the core to fuel the nacelles and send them warping through deep space at incredible velocities once more. He raised his eyes to the ceiling and spoke quietly to the love of his life—the *Enterprise* herself. “Dinnae worry yerself, lassie,” he told her. “The captain will get us away from the neutral zone borders and back to exploration where we belong, and no Klingon bastard will ever hurt yeh like that again. Yeh’ll see.”

* * * * *

In uniform, though he had no real reason to be, Captain James T. Kirk stood alone before the observation deck’s large bay window, looking out at the *Enterprise* moored in

space dock. Her starboard warp nacelle had finally been replaced with a brand new one and the work on the port nacelle appeared to be nearing completion, while most of the much less extensive repairs on various other areas of the ship continued, having been put off until all of the warp core and propulsion engineering-related work was done. *It'll be good to finally get off this starbase and back to exploration again*, he thought.

"Morning, Jim," he heard Doctor Leonard McCoy say from behind him as he walked into the room.

"Good morning, Bones," Kirk replied without turning away from the window, simply watching McCoy's reflection grow closer as he approached.

McCoy stepped up beside him and then joined him in gazing out through the window at the *Enterprise* for a moment. Then he asked, "How's our patient this morning?"

"Almost finished...finally," Kirk replied with obvious relief. "Scotty tells me maybe by late tomorrow afternoon, if all of his tests go well."

McCoy grinned and leaned in a little closer and quipped, "Someone must have gone and told him about tomorrow night's bowling tournament." Then, when Kirk barely reacted, he backed off again and added, "Still, that's good news."

"I'll say it is," Kirk agreed, finally looking at McCoy, noticing for the first time that he, too, was in uniform. "What are you doing in uniform?" he asked him.

"I could ask you the same thing, you know," McCoy pointed out.

Kirk looked his old friend in the eye, then turned his gaze back out through the big bay window. "Forget I asked."

"Already forgotten," McCoy replied as he, too, looked back out at the ship. He paused for a moment, then looked at his captain again and asked another part of him, "So how's our *other* patient this morning?"

Kirk's gaze fell to the windowsill in front of his knees as his expression turned to one of sad reflection. "Still no change as far as I can tell," he replied. "Scotty tells me he's been working right through most of his meal breaks. I had to give him a direct order to eat dinner in the officers' mess last night just to get him off the ship for a little while. He still won't talk to anyone about what's really bothering him, though."

"You could order him to go to counseling," McCoy suggested.

"I did," Kirk told him after a weak snicker. "He reported, as ordered...and didn't say one damn word to the counselor the whole time he was there."

McCoy nodded once and said, "Yeah, he's a Kirk all right." Kirk didn't respond to that. He didn't reply at all, in fact, and McCoy quickly grew uncomfortable with his silence. Not because he feared that he'd put him off—he knew the captain a lot better than that—but rather because he knew that to be a sign that he was troubled. He rested a hand gently on his friend's shoulder, hoping to comfort him, if only a little. "Jim..."

"I'm worried about him, Bones," Kirk admitted.

"He's your nephew, Jim. Of course you're worried about him." Kirk responded with silence once more, and McCoy finally decided that it would be best to pursue a different topic of conversation altogether, at least for the time being. "So," he said, trying to sound more positive as he looked out at the *Enterprise* again. "Late tomorrow afternoon, huh?"

"For a test run only," Kirk clarified. "It'll be another day or two before we're ready to launch, assuming everything goes well tomorrow."

"Scotty's been in charge of repairs since they started," the doctor reminded him, "as if he'd ever have let anyone else near his engines. It'll go well tomorrow."

"Probably," Kirk agreed non-committally.

"It *has* to go well," McCoy emphasized. "Some of the crew are starting to go space-happy, we've been stuck on this station for so long." He drew a deep breath and sighed. "You would think they could have built it in orbit of a more hospitable planet."

"It's the strategic location that's important, Bones," Kirk pointed out, "not the quality of the accommodations. It's lucky for us they *did* built it here. Otherwise we'd likely still be limping through space on impulse power and the *Enterprise* would be our permanent home."

"Be that as it may, everyone's raring to get back aboard and get out of here. At least, everyone I've managed to find."

Kirk turned his eyes to the doctor. "Who can't you find?" he asked with concern.

"Spock and Sulu," McCoy told him without hesitation. "I can't seem to find either of them anywhere. Any clue where they might be?"

"Spock is on Vulcan," Kirk replied, his concern waning. "His mother asked him to go for a visit before Ambassador Sarek gets himself all wrapped up in preparations for some big Babel conference coming up soon. He'll be back by the time we're ready to launch."

"I see. And Sulu?"

"Requested an extension on his leave. I've decided to grant it."

"Good," McCoy replied, thinking back. "*He* could probably use some counseling, too. It's hard enough I don't get to see my daughter. I can't even imagine what it must feel like to go through what he did. Spock should never have given him those memories back."

"I'd have wanted the memories, too, were I in his position," Kirk told his friend. "Raising a child and then having no memory of it, or not even knowing that you ever *had* a child out there somewhere?" He shook his head. "I wouldn't want that."

McCoy gazed at his friend seriously, knowing very well that to say anything on that particular subject was to step out on some very thin ice. Nevertheless, he asked anyway. "Are you sure about that, Jim?"

"Yes," Kirk answered quickly and firmly. "I am."

"Captain Kirk," a deep baritone voice called out to them in greeting from behind. "Lieutenant Commander McCoy."

Kirk and McCoy briefly met one another's gaze as they turned around to find the salt and pepper-haired Admiral Heihachiro Nogura approaching them from the doorway. Over his standard black slacks and boots he was wearing an obviously brand new and very different looking uniform tunic of gray-green with a bright white front panel and a stiff high collar, and carrying a cup of what was most likely hot coffee in each hand.

"Admiral Nogura," Kirk returned to acknowledge the man's arrival. "I thought..."

"Give us the room, Doctor," the older man ordered, sparing no time for pleasantries.

McCoy glanced at Kirk with a sour expression on his face as he started to leave and told him, "I'll see you later, Jim. It's suddenly getting a little crowded in here."

Nogura grimaced noticeably at McCoy's words, so Kirk scolded the ornery old doctor with a simple, "Bones," before the admiral could decide to do something more. Then, as the doctor made a hasty exit muttering who knew what under his breath, Kirk turned his attention to the admiral and said, "I thought you transferred to Starfleet Command."

“Soon,” the admiral informed him, “or so I’m told.” He handed one of those cups of coffee he was carrying to Kirk, then changed the subject by nodding toward the *Enterprise* and saying, “Still holding vigil over your lovely lady, I see.”

“I’m her captain, sir,” Kirk told him, as though anyone alive didn’t already know that. “Holding vigil over her is part of my job.”

“Every day?” the admiral inquired. “What would your Doctor McCoy say about that, I wonder?”

Kirk grinned. “You don’t want to know.”

“Bet I could guess.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t.”

“He’d say you’re obsessed with your ship,” Nogura told him anyway, his preferences obviously immaterial as far as the admiral was concerned. “He’d say something along the lines of, you suffer from separation anxiety whenever you’re away from her for very long.”

“And he’d be wrong,” Kirk replied in his own defense.

“Would he be, Jim?” Nogura asked him outright. When Kirk didn’t answer that, he continued, “You do know you’re going to have to give her up some day, right?”

“Of course, someday,” Kirk acknowledged hesitantly, “but not today.”

“No, not today,” Nogura confirmed.

Kirk looked the admiral in the eye for a moment and then dropped his gaze to the unusual tunic he was wearing. He asked, “What can I do for you, Admiral? You didn’t come down here just to show me your new uniform. What kind of uniform is that, anyway?”

“New admiral’s uniform,” Nogura answered while Kirk took a tentative sip of his steaming coffee. “Maybe. We’re just starting the testing phase.”

“I vote no,” Kirk told him directly. “Looks too stiff. Could use some color, too.”

“Are you a starship captain or a fashion consultant?” Nogura asked him, seemingly put off a little bit by his uninvited criticism.

Probably designed it himself, Kirk thought, but he asked, “So...why *did* you come up here, Admiral? What can I do for you?”

“I came to let you know that I’ve finally received your marching orders.”

Kirk’s heart skipped a beat. This was it. This was the moment when he was going to find out if the *Enterprise* was finally going back to deep space exploration where she and her crew belonged...or not. “And those orders are?” he asked, feeling a little bit anxious.

“*Enterprise* has been assigned to patrol both the Klingon and Romulan neutral zone sectors again,” the admiral answered matter-of-factly.

Kirk sighed with disappointment—that was the *last* thing he’d wanted to hear—then asked, “Why does that not surprise me?”

“Cynicism in the face of one’s superior officers is unbecoming of a command grade officer,” Nogura pointed out.

“What ever happened to space exploration, Admiral?” Kirk asked the man, ignoring his admonishing comment.

“Jim,” Nogura said more patiently. “You will recall that the Romulan Star Empire just tested a devastating new weapon, and...”

“And all indications are they still think it failed catastrophically,” Kirk pointing out, interrupting, knowing full well that Nogura was already well aware of that fact.

“That’s true, thanks to you,” the admiral acknowledged, “but that doesn’t change the fact they’ve got invasion on their minds again. Add to that the fact that the Organians seem to be sitting on their laurels for some reason...”

“We don’t know that for sure, Admiral,” Kirk said, interrupting again. He realized he was grasping at straws, but if he was going to have any chance of getting those patrol orders changed...

“Don’t we?” the admiral challenged. “Then why haven’t they interfered by now? Can you tell me that? They met *you* personally. They played host to you on their world. Why didn’t they stop the Klingon attack on the *Enterprise*?”

“Those weren’t *just* Klingons, Admiral.” Kirk reminded the man. “That was the *Dark Destroyer*—Captain Kargh’s new battlecruiser.” He turned his back and stepped over toward the window again. “We seem to have developed quite a...an unusual relationship, he and I.”

“So I’ve noticed,” Nogura remarked as he joined Kirk by the window. He sipped his coffee, then continued, “But aggression is aggression. They should have interfered regardless. Why didn’t they?”

“I don’t know,” Kirk finally admitted.

“Exactly. So now we’re faced with our two most threatening enemies each adopting a more aggressive posture, and each poised to take advantage of the situation should the other decide to start an all-out war against us. Starfleet Command needs its most storied captain and its fastest, most modern starship out there on the front line to deter them. That means you and the *Enterprise*, my friend. And...those are your orders.”

Kirk drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. If there was a way out of this, he wasn’t seeing it. The *Enterprise* was going back to the neutral zone region, and there was nothing he could do to change that. “I want my crew back, Admiral,” he finally said. Then he turned his back to the window and looked Nogura straight in the eye. “All of them. I don’t want to hear that so-and-so has already been reassigned and can’t be recalled.”

“Not a problem, Jim,” Nogura told him, “...for the most part.”

Kirk’s eyes narrowed with suspicion. Who was he going to lose? “For the most part?” he asked. “What does that mean?”

“Starfleet Command has decided to assign...shall we say...an *enhanced* security force to the *Enterprise*.”

“An *enhanced* security force?” Kirk asked him. “What does that mean?”

Now it was Nogura’s turn to draw a deep breath and exhale slowly. He did so, and then told the captain, “We’re replacing a number of your security troops with...MACOs.”

“MACOs!” Kirk started, almost choking on his coffee. “Excuse me, Admiral, but the MACOs were absorbed into the regular Security Forces almost a century ago!”

“That’s...not entirely true, Captain,” Nogura told him.

“It isn’t?”

“No, it isn’t. We’ve always kept a relatively small number of them around. Some are assigned to select destroyers. Others we use from time to time for...certain contingencies.”

Kirk took another tentative sip of coffee—it was still far too hot to drink—and then stepped over to the nearest table and set his cup aside, folded his arms across his chest and asked, suspecting that he already knew the answer, “What kind of certain contingencies?”

“I guess you could classify the majority of them as...code thirty-one contingencies,” the admiral replied.

Kirk sighed. Well, at least the admiral wasn't trying to skirt the issue. “Code thirty-one contingencies,” he repeated, not at all surprised. His suspicions had been correct. He had already known the answer. “You mean as in Section Thirty-One.” It wasn't a question.

“I do indeed,” the admiral freely admitted.

“How are they still in business after what they just tried to do?” Kirk then asked, clearly discouraged by the revelation.

“Those kinds of contingency operations are why they exist in the first place, Jim,” Nogura informed him impatiently. “That's what they do.”

Kirk finally let it out—finally lost his cool and slammed his fist down on the tabletop. “Well my ship is *not* a contingency operation!” he shouted, “Code thirty-one or otherwise! And she's *not* a warship! The *Enterprise* is a ship dedicated to peaceful exploration! I won't allow her to be taken over by combat troops! My Security Forces can handle anything we might run into!”

“All right, first of all, *Captain*...” Nogura replied after a moment, counting off ‘one’ by raising a finger, “the *Enterprise* is not *your* ship. It's Starfleet's ship. And second,” he added, raising a second finger, “the decision has already been made. You don't have a choice in the matter...unless, of course, you want to resign your commission.”

“Don't tempt me, Admiral.”

Nogura harrumphed. “I know you a lot better than that, Jim.” Then he rested a gentle hand on Kirk's shoulder and reminded him, “When you accepted command of the *Enterprise*, you were assigned an overall five-year mission. You're only in year four and you've never been a quitter. You won't resign before you've completed it, and probably not even then.”

“That's right, Admiral,” Kirk acknowledged, latching onto the man's own words. “A five-year mission to explore strange new worlds—to seek out new life and new civilizations. Not a mission to wage war against our neighbors.”

“You're not going out there to wage war, Jim,” Nogura told him as he turned his back and started walking toward the door. “You're going out there to defend the Federation against unwarranted aggression.” He stopped just outside the door and looked back over his shoulder. “You're getting the MACOs, *Captain*. Deal with it.”

Kirk watched the door close behind the admiral, then sighed as he turned around and gazed out at the *Enterprise* once more.

“Make her good and strong, Scotty.”

CHAPTER 2 - Three Days Later

Enterprise Communications Chief Lieutenant Nyota Uhura sat straight-backed at her desk in her quarters, still wearing the loose-fitting, colourful red, pink, and gold Swahili-influenced robe that she liked to relax in, enjoying a pleasant conversation with her mother back on Earth over subspace. She didn't have a lot of time, but she hadn't spoken with her in so long that she'd simply had to jump at the opportunity.

"...and after that conference in Washington, your father is heading to Kenya to lead a panel in discussions on the latest archaeological digs going on in Nigeria," her mother told her. *"Apparently, they've finally discovered more evidence of some kind to support his theory that there was something oddly unique about Mitochondrial Eve."*

Nyota smiled. Her father had been pushing that theory of his for years. "Father must be very pleased," she guessed. "He's worked long and hard to get the scientific community to take his theories seriously."

"That's for sure," her mother agreed with emphasis. *"It's nice to see him getting some real recognition for a change."*

"And what about you, Mother?" Nyota then asked. "How are things on the Federation Council?"

Her mother hesitated for a moment, then answered, *"A little frustrating, to be honest with you. So many different races always wanting the same thing, but always in their own unique way. The Klingon problem has only exacerbated the disagreements, and there is still no signs of the Organians. I fear we're truly on our own this time, Nyota."*

"I still wonder why you let yourself get elected to the Federation Council in the first place," Nyota told her. "I thought you were happy being *Doctor* Penda Uhura, exobiologist."

"Oh, I was. I mean...I am. Look at it this way, Nyota. Interacting with all the different alien representatives on the Council is an exobiologist's dream."

"I guess I can understand that."

"Turns out I'm pretty good at politics, too...surprisingly enough."

"Why is that a surprise? You always knew how to make people understand your point of view. You know diplomacy."

Her mother smiled knowingly at her. *"Seems you do as well,"* she said.

Nyota smiled back at her mother. "I'm a communications and xeno-linguistics officer aboard a Federation starship, Mother."

"Good point."

Her mother was well aware of that, of course, but she rarely if ever missed a chance to let her daughter know how proud she was of her. "And how is dear Uncle Mhandisi?" Nyota asked her, deflecting her attention. "Has he made it back home yet?"

"Come and gone again."

"Again?" Nyota exclaimed. That uncle of hers couldn't seem to stay put anywhere for very long. "Where's he off to this time?"

"He's heading out beyond the colony worlds, helping the Corps of Engineers upgrade some of the old automated mining stations."

“I thought he was through with all that.”

“*He was,*” her mother confirmed, “*but they offered him his own team. He’s having the time of his life out there.*”

“Speaking of time,” Nyota said, necessarily but not without regret, “I have to go now, Mother. I have a briefing to get ready for.”

“*All right, Nyota. As always, be careful out there. I love you, Daughter.*”

“As always, I will be,” Nyota promised her. “I love you, too, Mother. Give my love to Father as well.”

“*I will. Goodbye.*”

“Goodbye.”

Nyota closed the channel, stood up from her desk and walked across the room to her closet, then started to change her clothes, transforming herself from Miss Nyota Uhura, daughter to one of Earth’s Federation Council representatives, back into Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, communications chief of the Starship *Enterprise*.

Having been ordered by Commander Scott to take at least the next twelve hours off, his aching heart still filled with more sadness and emptiness than he ever would have thought possible—all of those extra hours he’d put in had done nothing to sooth his anguish—Ensign Peter Kirk quietly entered the quarters he shared with the Vulcan Lieutenant Xon, pulled off his red uniform shirt and tossed it on his bunk, and then walked over to his desk and picked up the gold-framed photo of Alex that he still displayed there. He’d loved Alex so much, and Alex had loved him. He sat down on his bunk and stared at the photograph, and imagined that it was more—that Alex was standing there right in front of him, smiling at him, the love he felt for him shining through his eyes.

He traced Alex’s outline with his fingertip. “It still hurts, Uncle Jim,” he whispered. “When is it going to stop hurting?”

He set the photo down beside him as the tears welled up in his eyes, then just sat there and let them flow.

Captain Kirk sat with his Vulcan first officer, Commander Spock, Doctor McCoy, Scotty, Security Chief Lieutenant Dickerson, and Lieutenants Uhura and Chekov around the briefing room table for the last time before launch. Finally, the day had come. “Status, Mister Scott?” he asked, anticipating nothing but good news.

“All systems are online and optimal, Captain,” the chief engineer reported. “The ol’ lass is back in form and ready to set sail for a good shakedown as soon as yeh give the word.”

“As good as your word as always, Mister Scott,” Kirk praised the man whose tireless efforts had gotten the job done once more. “Thank you.”

“Aye, sir,” The Scot replied, beaming with pride.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have time for a shakedown,” Kirk told everyone at the table, and as he watched the smile fade from the chief engineer’s lips he explained, “We’re being pressed back into service immediately.”

“What else is new?” McCoy remarked, rolling his eyes.

“But...sir,” Scotty calmly protested, “without a proper shakedown...”

"I know the drill, Scotty," Kirk reminded the man without waiting for him to finish. Then he explained, "Three days ago, Admiral Nogura advised me that the *Enterprise* has not been reassigned to exploration as I requested. We will instead be returning once again to our previous patrol sector."

"Oh, that's just great," McCoy droned.

"A logical decision, Captain, if somewhat disappointing," Spock pointed out. "With tensions rising along both neutral zones, even boiling over in some cases where the Klingons are concerned, assigning the fastest and most advanced starship in the fleet to patrol that area, while something of a gamble, may well be Starfleet's wisest move. Our continued presence there should serve as an effective deterrent to further aggressive behavior on the part of either empire."

"You and you damnable cold-blooded logic, Spock!" McCoy protested, glaring and scowling at him. "Our continued presence there a few months ago sure as hell didn't serve as an effective deterrent against Kargh, did it! This ship and this crew have been back and forth up and down the front lines for over three years now! We've dealt with more aggression and outright conflict than any three other starships combined! Do you have any idea how many young men and women we've lost out there?"

"Indeed I do, Doctor. We have lost exactly..."

"Spock," Kirk said, instantly silencing his first officer. "Bones."

McCoy looked over at the captain and quickly calmed himself down. "Sorry, Jim," he offered. "God knows you don't need to be reminded."

"Forget it, Bones. What's done is done."

"Yes it is," McCoy agreed as he looked more closely at his captain—at his friend. He saw something in his expression and decided to say something about it. "But from the look on your face, I'm guessing you're not referring to the people we've lost *or* my bringing it up. What haven't you told us yet, Jim?"

Kirk turned his eyes to Lieutenant Dickerson and told him, "This will affect you more than anyone else sitting here, Lieutenant."

"Why is that, sir?" Dickerson asked him.

"A large part of your Security Forces will not be returning to the ship. They've been replaced...for now...by a company of MACOs."

"MACOs!" McCoy blurted out. "What in blazes are MACOs?"

"A kind of shark, as far as I know," Uhura offered in reply.

"Military Assault Command Operations," Kirk advised them. "Soldiers. The MACOs served as Earth's combat troops in the twenty-second century—a separate command from Starfleet, until shortly after the Federation was founded, at which time most of us *thought* they were folded into Starfleet's Security Forces. Turns out most of us were wrong. Starfleet still uses them for...certain contingencies."

"My God, Jim!" McCoy said. "Security Forces I can understand, but military combat troops on the *Enterprise*?"

"That's right, Bones. Starfleet has just turned the *Enterprise* into a warship."

"How long ago did Starfleet reform the MACOs, Captain?" Dickerson asked.

“Apparently, Lieutenant, they never completely disbanded them,” Kirk replied. “They just hid them away from the rest of us...some of them, as it turns out, under the operational jurisdiction of Section Thirty-One.”

“Them again,” McCoy said, throwing his hands in the air and rolling his eyes as he sat back in his chair. “As if screwing around with bloodworms wasn’t bad enough...”

“I reminded Admiral Nogura that the *Enterprise* is not a warship and that the presence of combat troops aboard her is not appropriate, but he informed me that Starfleet Command had already made its decision.”

“Interesting,” Spock opined, raising an eyebrow. “That decision on Starfleet’s part, while it may be logical, as I previously stated, also reflects a distinct shift in longstanding Federation policy in regards to the preemptive showing of military force. Considering the shift toward more aggressive...”

“Logical shift or not,” McCoy spouted, interrupting, “that decision is *wrong*, Spock. You of all people should be the last to agree with it!”

“All due respect, Mister Spock,” Lieutenant Chekov interjected before the first officer could reply, “Doctor McCoy is right. Besides, what do we need with these MACOs in the first place? Lieutenant Dickerson trains his people according to Russian security doctrine, so they are *already* the finest security force in the fleet.”

“Oh, brother,” McCoy mumbled, rolling his eyes once more.

“Aye, they are,” Scotty chimed in, seeming to agree with the proud Russian navigator. But then he added, “*In spite o’ that*,” and everyone grinned at the joke...except for Chekov, of course...and Spock.

“I did not say that I agree with it, Doctor,” the Vulcan flatly pointed out instead.

“Well then why are you defending it?” McCoy threw back at him.

“I am not defending it,” Spock replied, showing no evidence to indicate that McCoy was getting a rise out of him. “I merely stated that it is a logical decision.”

“Gods in Valhalla, save us,” McCoy droned, “he sounds more like a blasted computer every day.”

“Why, thank you, Doctor.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Kirk pressed.

“In fact, I do *not* agree with the decision,” Spock continued, steering the briefing back on track. “In fact, I agree wholeheartedly with the captain’s statement that this vessel is not a warship and that the presence of combat troops aboard it is inappropriate.”

“Well now that we know how we all feel...” Kirk said. Then he looked over at his chief of security and asked, “Mister Dickerson, do you anticipate any problems between your people and the MACOs?”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Dickerson replied, shaking his head. “My people will all maintain their discipline. But if I may ask, sir, how many of them am I losing as a result of all this?”

“One for one exchange,” Kirk told him flatly. “An entire company’s worth.”

Dickerson drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, clearly not having anticipated such a substantial loss. “That’s a hell of a lot of manpower, sir,” he said, stating the obvious. “Are the MACOs going to augment our duty roster?”

“Not as a rule, no. They’ll answer to their own C-O and will *not* be integrated with your security force. That being said, I know it leaves you stretched thin, so if you find you

need more manpower, you come to me and *I'll* go to their commanding officer. I don't want you overworking your people as a result of all this. Understood?"

"Clearly, sir."

"You will need two for vone, Lieutenant," Chekov told the man. "I doubt the MACOs use Russian doctrine."

Kirk turned his attention to his communications chief. "Lieutenant Uhura, the MACO commander will be bringing a guide to all of their classified communications protocols with him. As soon as he arrives I want you *personally* to load the necessary programming into the ship's communications system, then give the backup to Mister Spock. Disseminate to your staff only as you determine the need."

"Yes, Captain."

The all-call whistled over the speaker in front of Kirk. "*Bridge to Captain Kirk,*" the on-duty communication officer's voice then followed.

Kirk pressed the button on the comm.-unit in front of him and Lieutenant Elizabeth Palmer's image appeared on the tri-screen monitor in the center of the table. "Kirk here," he answered.

"*Starbase Operations advising the colonel you're expecting is standing by to beam over, sir,*" Palmer reported. "*A party of three, sir, and...well...they sound rather anxious to be rid of them.*"

Kirk grimaced. He *really* didn't want the MACOs coming aboard his ship, and that bit of news didn't make him feel any better about it. "Have him stand by," he instructed the lieutenant. "We'll be on our way to the transporter room in a minute. Kirk out." Kirk thumbed the button and the little white light on the comm. unit blinked off, then stood up, and everyone except for McCoy followed suit. "Scotty, Uhura, you're with me. Everyone else report to your stations."

McCoy stood up in front of Kirk as the captain started to walk around the table, blocking his way, and then leaned back against the table and folded his arms in front of him. "Military Assault Command Operations?" he asked. "Section thirty-one...again? I don't like the sound of any of that, Captain."

"Neither do I, Bones," Kirk assured him.

"I mean it, Jim. Combat troops mean combat action, and that means a lot of dead and wounded personnel in my sickbay. That's not what we're out there for, and to be honest with you, I don't know how much more of it I can take. I'm starting to think I should've resigned while I had the chance—gone back home to Georgia, started my own practice, and grown a big old bushy beard."

Kirk grinned at the mental picture that painted in his mind, then said, "You couldn't leave Starfleet any easier than I could."

"Don't be so sure about that, Jim. With all we've seen out here..."

"Just be ready if and when we need you, Bones."

McCoy stood up and dropped his hands to his sides, taking on a more aggressive posture, and looked his captain right in the eye. "I *am* ready, Captain, much as I hope I'm not needed," he said. Then he asked, "Are you?"

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "And just what the hell is that that supposed to mean, Doctor?" he asked sharply.

McCoy looked over at Scotty and Uhura, who were waiting for the captain by the door. Kirk followed with his eyes and gazed at them as well, and Scotty took the hint.

"C'mon, lassie," the chief engineer said to the communications officer as he started to turn away. "That's our cue to go wait for the captain in the corridor."

"Don't I know it, Scotty," Uhura agreed, following.

"All right, Bones, spill it," Kirk continued, glaring back at McCoy when the other two had gone. "What did you mean by that remark?"

"What else is bothering you, Jim?" the doctor asked him, slightly less aggressively but still looking him right in the eye. "I know you don't want these MACOs here any more than the rest of us do, but there's something else. I can tell."

"Mind-melding now, Doctor?" Kirk asked his bold but well-meaning friend. "You've been spending too much time with Mister Spock."

"Don't be insulting, and stop trying to skirt the issue."

Kirk sighed. Obviously, the doctor wasn't just going to let him walk away from the conversation this time. He wasn't just talking to him as a friend. He was talking to him as the ship's chief medical officer, analyzing—for lack of a better term—the ship's captain. "All right, Bones," he finally acquiesced. And then he admitted, "It's Peter. Every time I see him, I can't help but see that look on his face from Mister Freeman's funeral."

"Jim, you of all people know that losing people we love is an unavoidable part of this journey we call life. It's never easy, but we deal with it. We pick ourselves up and we move on, and those we've lost live on in our hearts and minds—our memories. He's a tough kid. He's a *Kirk*. He'll be all right."

"I know that, Bones, but right now he's hurting. He's hurting deeply."

"Of course he's hurting, Jim. He loved Mister Freeman very much."

"They were planning to marry. Did you know that?" McCoy didn't answer. "I never should have assigned Mister Freeman to the *Copernicus* team."

"Jim, you told me yourself not two weeks ago that you weren't going to assign Peter to the team until he pointed out to you that such a decision would stink of preferential treatment to the rest of the crew. If you'd held Mister Freeman back for Peter's sake, that would have stunk of the same thing every bit as much."

"I didn't even know they were a couple when I assigned him."

"You didn't..." McCoy could hardly believe his ears. "Well then what the hell are you beating yourself up over?"

Kirk sighed. "I don't know, Bones. It just... It pains me to see my own nephew going through the same thing I..." He stopped short and changed tracks. "I wouldn't wish that pain on anyone."

"I see," McCoy said. And he did. Jim had bitten off his words and swallowed what he'd been about to say, but he'd said enough. "Alana really did stir up some old wounds, didn't she?" Kirk looked at him coldly, but his was not an angry glare—not a warning for McCoy to back off. "I know she mentioned Edith."

"Don't you have some preparations to finish, Doctor?" Kirk asked him, diverting their conversation suddenly.

Now *that* was an angry glare. "Yes, sir," McCoy timidly replied after a moment. Then he turned away and headed for the door. "Yes, I do. I'm sorry, Jim."

Kirk stood and watched the door slide closed between them, then spoke softly, in a near whisper. “Forget it, Bones.”

A few minutes later, having turned his thoughts back to the situation at hand, Kirk walked into transporter room one to find Lieutenant Janice Rand standing at the controls, operating the system under Scotty’s close supervision. Lieutenant Uhura was standing just in front of the console, waiting. “Is the colonel and his party ready, Miss Rand?” he asked as the door slid closed behind him and he approached Uhura’s side.

“Standing by as requested, sir,” the recently commissioned former yeoman answered. “Awaiting your order.”

“A full colonel in command of a mere company, sir?” Scotty asked.

“A company of MACO soldiers is not your average company, Mister Scott,” Kirk replied. Then, not wanting to waste any time, he ordered, “Energize.”

Scotty watched closely while Rand manipulated the controls somewhat tentatively but with no real hesitation. Then, slowly and steadily, the green-shirted MACO commanding officer, his charcoal-shirted staff officer—her rank wasn’t as obvious as the three silver bands of braid around the colonel’s cuffs made his—and his dark camouflage-uniformed Andorian top NCO—a muscular figure at least two meters tall if he was a foot—materialized on the platform...and Kirk could not believe his eyes. A little taller than he remembered, though that might only have been because he was standing on the platform, firm-muscled from what he could see, his blond hair cut short and just beginning to gray around the temples, and sporting a rather ugly vertical scar that ran from the right side of his forehead and down through his right eyebrow to end halfway down his cheek, his old Academy nemesis stood before him like the ghost of Christmas past...or rather, like the ghost of *Halloween* past.

“Jimmy-boy!” the colonel. greeted him, smiling wide and raising his arms out as though inviting the captain to run up to him and give him a hug. “What a pleasure it is to see yeh again after all these years!”

Kirk’s face froze without expression of any kind, and all he could manage to say was, “Finnegan.”

CHAPTER 3

“Sean Gavin Finnegan,” Kirk muttered when he could speak again.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain?” Finnegan asked, his canary-eating grin barely fading at all.

“Permission...granted,” Kirk begrudgingly replied, wishing that he could have denied him and thrown him and his people off the ship instead. Truth be told, Sean Gavin Finnegan was perhaps the last person he’d ever wanted to see again, despite how good it had felt to beat the tar out of his doppelganger a few years ago. The man had done all he could to make his first year at the academy a living hell.

“Yeh don’ look too happy to see me, Jimmy-boy,” Finnegan observed as he and those accompanying him stepped down off the transporter platform.

“You and I were never exactly the best of friends, Colonel,” Kirk reminded him. As if he weren’t already well aware of that.

“We were young men then,” Finnegan pointed out as though that were sufficient to explain away everything he had done to torment him. “It’s ancient history.”

“If you say so.” Kirk clearly wasn’t buying it.

Finnegan turned and gestured toward the woman standing to his left and said, “Allow me to introduce me staff. Major Elizabeth Peterson, me aid and liaison officer.”

“Very pleased to meet you, Captain Kirk,” Peterson said, smiling invitingly as she and Kirk shook hands. “I’ve heard a lot about you, sir.”

“I’ll bet you have,” Kirk remarked, trying to imagine what Finnegan might have told her about him.

Finnegan then turned and gestured to the Andorian on his right, who folded his hands behind his back and looked down his nose at Kirk—a nose that had obviously been broken, likely on more than one occasion. “And this is Sergeant Shirem, me top N-C-O.”

“Sergeant,” Kirk said evenly, offering his hand as he stared up at the blue-skinned man’s greenish-blue eyes.

“Captain,” the sergeant returned flatly, ignoring his hand.

Kirk dropped his hand back to his side and stared the unfriendly Andorian in the eye for a moment. Then he followed Finnegan’s example, gestured toward each of his officers in turn, and introduced them to the MACOs. He would have done anyway, of course, even if Finnegan hadn’t done it first. “This is Lieutenant Commander Scott, my Chief Engineer, and Lieutenant Rand. And my Chief Communications Officer, Lieutenant Uhura. I believe you have something for her, Colonel.”

Finnegan nodded to Peterson, then asked Kirk, “I trust yeh have quarters all ready for me troops, Jimmy?” as Peterson handed a record tape to Uhura.

“All taken care of, Colonel,” Kirk replied.

“Good. They’ll be arrivin’ momentarily aboard several brand new combat shuttles, two of which will remain aboard the *Enterprise* for the duration.”

“What’s that yeh’re sayin’, sir?” Scotty inquired with obvious concern. He turned his eyes to Kirk and complained, “Captain Kirk, those beasties are nearly twice the length and

half again the width o' standard shuttlecrafts. We dinnae have near the room to house a pair o' them in our wee hangar bay. No' on a permanent basis."

"They're not that much bigger, Mister Scott," Finnegan countered, "And those orders come directly from Starfleet Command. If yeh don' already have room for 'em, yeh'll *make* room for 'em. That's an order, too."

Kirk's expression grew stern and he stepped right up into Finnegan's face. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear right here and now, Colonel," he said, noting that he wasn't as tall as he'd first appeared. "You don't *ever* talk to *my* crew that way. If you have orders for my people, you go through me." Then, without giving Finnegan a chance to reply, he turned to Scotty and told him, "I'll verify that order with Starfleet Command, Mister Scott. In the meantime, start doing whatever you can to make room for them, just in case."

"Aye, Captain," the engineer replied, clearly not happy to comply. Then, on his way out, he added, talking mostly to himself, "After all, we certainly would no' want hangar deck operations to interfere with the colonel's personal priorities."

Finnegan waited for door to close behind the chief engineer, then asked Kirk, "Do yeh always let yer officers talk to yeh that way, Jimmy?"

Kirk glared back at him. "Do *not* call me 'Jimmy,' Colonel," he insisted. "I am the captain of this vessel. You will address me as 'captain' or 'sir.' Understood?" Once again, he didn't wait for the colonel to reply. Instead he turned his back on the man and headed for the door. "The hangar deck is this way, Colonel."

"By all means," Finnegan replied, "lead the way, Captain, sir."

At first the colonel and his aides followed Kirk through the corridor quietly, without saying anything more, but after those first few moments Finnegan apparently couldn't hold back anymore and he stepped up beside him. "Look, *Captain*," he said. "I know I gave yeh a hard time back at the academy. That's what upperclassmen do to plebes, in case yeh have forgotten. But that was a long time ago. As the sayin' goes...water under the bridge."

"You did a lot more than just give me a hard time, Colonel, but it's not just about that," Kirk replied without looking at him while Shirem and Peterson whispered something that he couldn't quite hear behind him.

"No?" Finnegan asked. "Then what's it about?"

"*Bridge to Captain Kirk*," came a voice over the intercom.

Kirk glanced at the colonel and then stepped over to a comm.-panel on the bulkhead and pressed the small white button, switching on the light that indicated the channel had been opened. "Kirk here."

"*We have several MACO assault shuttles approaching the hangar deck, sir. They're requesting permission to come aboard.*"

"Advise hangar bay flight control to allow them entry. We're on our way there now."

"Aye, *sir*."

"Then contact Starfleet Command. Advise that I am officially requesting confirmation of orders assigning a pair of those assault shuttles to the *Enterprise*."

"Aye, *Captain*."

"Kirk out." He pressed the button again, extinguishing the light, and then resumed leading the MACOs through the corridor.

"So what's it about, Captain?" Finnegan asked him.

“Colonel?”

“Yeh said yer attitude is no’ just about the way I treated yeh back at the academy. So what’s it about?”

“Later.”

Kirk and the three MACO leaders stood watching in one of the twin observation bays overlooking the hangar deck while a whole squadron of assault shuttles flew in through the open clamshell doors and landed what appeared to be dangerously close to one another on the deck, and then, once flight control raised the force field, opened their personnel hatches and allowed their battle fatigue-clad MACO troops to disembark, battle packs strapped over their backs, carrying their assault weapons, one duffle bag each in hand.

“So, are yeh goin’ to tell me what it’s about, Kirk, or not?” Finnegan asked him once more. “What’s got yeh all bent out o’ shape like a pretzel?”

Kirk glared sidelong at the man, knowing that sooner or later he was going to have to answer that question—Finnegan would only keep asking, otherwise—then decided that now was as good a time as any. “What’s got me all bent out of shape like a pretzel, plain and simple, Colonel, is Starfleet Command assigning a company of MACO combat troops to my ship. I don’t like it. I don’t like it one damn bit.”

“Aye, well...it was no’ my idea, Captain, so don’ take yer anger out on me. This was all Admiral Nogura’s doin’ right from the beginnin’, so I suggest...”

“Admiral Nogura’s doing?” Kirk asked him, surprised. “This was Nogura’s idea?”

Finnegan gazed at him as though he were surprised that he hadn’t already known that. “The official recommendation to Starfleet Command was his, aye,” he replied.

“Son-of-a...” Kirk bit off those words, then said instead, “He owes me *big* for this.”

“He’d probably agree with yeh there, Jimmy-boy, but if I know Admiral Nogura, and I do, gettin’ him to make it right won’ be easy. If I were you, Jimmy, I’d hold onto that card for a while...until yeh really need it.”

“*Bridge to Captain Kirk,*” Uhura’s voice came over the intercom.

“In fact,” Finnegan continued as Kirk walked over to the comm.-unit, “I would no’ play it ‘til yeh can make it really count for somethin’.”

“It counts for something right now, Colonel,” Kirk replied. “If all this was his idea, then he can stop it.” He pressed the button. “Kirk here. What’s the word, Lieutenant?”

“*Orders assigning a pair of MACO assault shuttles to the Enterprise are confirmed, Captain,*” Uhura replied, empathy evident in her tone. She knew that wasn’t what her captain had wanted to hear. “*And Dock Control has cleared us for departure when we’re ready.*”

“Acknowledged. Kirk out.” He pressed the button again. “Kirk to Scott.”

“Aye, sir, I heard the lass,” Scotty told him, his own discouraged tone betraying his disappointment. “*Can I have about thirty minutes of yer time down here?*”

“Certainly. I’m on my way. Kirk out.” He closed the channel.

“Jimmy-boy...”

“See to your people, Colonel,” Kirk told him as he looked out over the deck to see the MACO soldiers falling into military formation. Then, as he turned his back on the colonel and started to leave, he curtly explained, “I’m needed elsewhere.”

“*That’s* the legendary Captain James T. Kirk?” Major Peterson asked as she watched the door slid closed, separating the *Enterprise’s* captain from them.

“Aye. Indeed it is, Major,” Finnegan replied. “That man has come through for his crew and saved the Federation more times than I can count, if yeh can believe it.”

“I do *not* believe it, Colonel,” Sergeant Shirem informed his longtime commanding officer. “I suspect the number has been exaggerated.”

“I want the troops in the gym in one hour,” Finnegan told the NCO, changing the subject. He knew all too well what the man thought of commissioned officers in general and starship captains in particular, and he didn’t want to take the chance that one of Kirk’s four-hundred and twenty-some-odd minions might overhear something that he’d prefer they not overhear. “Physical trainin’ six days a week with hand-to-hand combat tactics every other day. Type o’ trainin’ on the in-between days is their choice.”

“Understood, sir,” Peterson said, cutting off the sergeant.

“Yeh’re still in charge o’ the specifics, Sergeant,” Finnegan clarified...quickly. “Yer program has kept ‘em battle-ready better than any I’ve ever seen. No reason to fix what is no’ broken.”

“Understood, sir,” the Andorian replied.

Finnegan drew a deep breath and sighed, then muttered as he stared at the closed door again, “Good ol’ Jimmy-boy Kirk. He just canno’ let things go, can he? I have a feelin’ this is gonna be a long assignment.”

“But what’s your *latest* phaser rating, Pavel?” Lieutenant DeSalle asked the navigator sitting to his right on the bridge with anticipation.

“It’s up a full point to ninety-eight since the last time,” the young Russian answered him proudly as he watched DeSalle’s grin quickly disappear, “so...what is yours now?”

“Never mind,” DeSalle replied as he turned his attention back to his board, looking as though he were sorry that he’d brought it up.

Sitting and listening in the center seat behind them, Spock raised an eyebrow at the exchange, and then canted his head slightly when he heard Captain Kirk exit the turbolift and step out onto the bridge.

“Lieutenant Uhura,” Kirk said as he walked past the communications station, “let me know as soon as the hangar deck reports all secure.”

“Aye, sir.”

Spock stood up and stepped aside as Kirk stepped down onto the center deck and then up to take his seat. He faced his captain and said, “So...Colonel Finnegan.”

“Yes indeed, Mister Spock,” Kirk replied, giving his Vulcan first officer an off look as he sat down. “Colonel Finnegan. A MACO colonel I don’t want, a company of soldiers we don’t need, and a pair of assault shuttles whose extensive logistical requirements Scotty just spent the last forty-five minutes bending my ear about.”

“Indeed. Mister Scott does sometimes tend to ramble on where ship’s engineering and operations are concerned.”

“Only until you agree with his assessment, Mister Spock,” Kirk quipped.

“May I presume, Captain, that once was sufficient?”

Kirk looked up at Spock. *Did I miss something?* he wondered. Whatever Spock was talking about now, it wasn't Scotty's tendency to ramble. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I refer to our attempt at taking shore leave on Omicron Delta..."

"Oh, that," Kirk suddenly recalled, knowing exactly to what Spock was referring.

"Yes, Captain," Spock confirmed. "That."

"That...wasn't really him, Spock," Kirk reminded him. "That was just...a fabrication. A fake. An artificial construct provided for my amusement."

"I am aware of that, sir. However..."

"However...the satisfaction I felt at the time *was* real, if short-lived."

"Precisely, sir. As I recall, you enjoyed it very much."

"You recall correctly."

"I believe your exact words were, 'The one thing I wanted to do after all these years was to beat the tar out of Finnegan,' which brings me back to my original question, Captain."

"No promises, Mister Spock," Kirk declared.

"May I remind you, sir, that although a certain amount of unruly behavior is to be expected among cadets—particularly among *human* cadets—both you and Colonel Finnegan are command level officers now, and as such..."

"He was always a practical joker and a bully, Spock," Kirk told him, "and for reasons I might never know, I became his favorite target."

Spock gazed at his captain for a moment, looking as though he couldn't understand why he was failing to see the point. Then he told him straight out, "Jim, past actions are not always a reliable indication of present intentions. The fact that *Cadet* Finnegan tormented you in your Starfleet Academy days does not necessarily mean that *Colonel* Finnegan..."

"Relax, Mister Spock," Kirk said, having heard enough. "I'm not an eighteen year old kid anymore. I got past all of it a long time ago. As long as he behaves himself, so will I. You know me."

"Indeed I do, sir," Spock agreed, raising an eyebrow as he turned and started walking back to his station. "That is precisely why I brought it up."

"Captain, hangar deck reports all secure, sir," Uhura reported.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk replied, still grinning at Spock's last words. "Mister DeSalle, clear all moorings and prepare for departure."

"Aye aye, sir," DeSalle acknowledged.

"Mister Chekov, plot a course for the Klingon neutral zone. Sherman's Planet sounds like a good place to start. Do you remember where it is?"

"Aye, Keptin," the young navigator replied. "I vill find it again, no tribble at all."

DeSalle cringed visibly as he looked over at his partner. "You did *not* really just say that, right, Pavel? *Please* tell me you didn't really just say that."

Chekov only smiled at him in response.

"Thrusters ahead, Mister DeSalle," Kirk ordered. "Take us out."

Slowly at first, and then steadily faster as she built up momentum, the *Enterprise* pulled out of from within the lattice-like frame that was Starbase Six's space dock, where she had spent so many weeks being repaired, upgraded, and generally tended to as though she

were a patient in Doctor McCoy's sickbay, ready once more to carry her captain and her crew wherever they might need to go. She accelerated into high orbit over the inhospitable planet far below, and then shot out of orbit and warped into deep space.

Captain's Log: Stardate 6474.8: After more than six long weeks in space dock, the Enterprise is finally back in service once again. With a company of MACOs onboard, we are enroute to our assigned patrol sector along the Klingon and Romulan neutral zones. With any luck this will turn out to be a long, dull, and uneventful assignment for our friends in camouflage and green, and if we're really lucky, perhaps we'll even get the opportunity to once more boldly go where no man has gone before.

CHAPTER 4 - Several Days Later

Nearly a dozen *Enterprise* security troops gathered near the wall and looked on with amusement as their chief, Lieutenant Dickerson, practiced hand-to-hand combat with one of their comrades in a matted training room in the ship's gym. Across the room, on a separate set of safety mats, two of their MACO counterparts—the big Andorian sergeant and one of his human subordinates—were sparring as well while several more of the soldiers watched, but a couple of them had become distracted and were paying more attention to Dickerson and his troop than they were to their own.

"The lieutenant's going down," one of those MACOs predicted.

"Nah. Just watch him," the other disagreed.

Dickerson stepped back, pulling his opponent off balance, then raised one foot to the woman's stomach, dropped to his back, and then flipped her over his head. She landed hard with a sound like the wind being knocked out of her while Dickerson leapt back to his feet quickly, ready to thwart any counterattack that might have followed, though none did.

"Bravo, Lieutenant," the first MACO said aloud, clapping his hands, apparently not caring that his sergeant had stopped sparring and was watching him. "But I wonder if you could take one of us down like that."

"Are you saying I couldn't?" Dickerson asked the man.

As the MACO started approaching the lieutenant, his comrades joined in behind him, except for Shirem, who only stood and watched. Seeing this, Dickerson's troops responded in kind, backing up their C.O. "I intended no offense, sir," the MACO told him, "but defeating one of your own security troops is one thing. Especially a woman."

"You want to go a couple rounds with me and see what *you* can do?" the security woman asked him as she picked herself up off the mat.

"Relax, I meant to offense," the MACO claimed. Then he looked at Dickerson again and told him, "Taking on a MACO is something else entirely."

"Anyone can defeat anyone on any given day, Trooper," Dickerson advised him.

"*Almost* anyone, sir," the MACO argued. "That 'anyone' of whom you speak couldn't defeat a MACO unless he was a MACO himself..." He shifted his gaze back to the security woman. "...or *herself*," he added for her benefit.

Dickerson glanced over at the MACOs and realized for the first time that none of them were woman, and he wondered how the female MACOs would have reacted—he knew there were a few with them, as he had seen them around the ship—had they heard the way this particular comrade of theirs was talking. He also Realized that his own security troops were watching him, waiting to see how he would respond. The captain had essentially told him to avoid trouble between the two groups, but a challenge was a challenge. "Care for a chance to prove that, Trooper?" he finally asked his challenger.

The MACO grinned and asked, "Care to put some credits on it, sir?"

Behind them, both groups started making wagers amongst themselves.

"No credits," Dickerson told him. "Captain Kirk's probably going to have my hide for this as it is. Let's keep it friendly, just for fun and morale."

The challenger nodded. "Fair enough, sir. You and me then, just for fun and morale?"
"You're on, Trooper."

Dickerson and his challenger shook hands and then squared off a few feet from one another. Someone shouted "Fight!" and the match was on. *Enterprise* security personnel and MACOs alike watched with excitement as the two combatants felt each other out and then went at it for the next several minutes. Both of them put on an impressive performance. In the end, the MACO found himself on his back and Lieutenant Dickerson emerged victorious, but good sport that he was, Dickerson offered the man a hand up right away and then shook his hand and thanked him for a good match.

"Well done, Lieutenant," Sergeant Shirem said as he approached Dickerson. "Now let us find out what you *really* have."

Ship's Log, U.S.S. Enterprise, stardate 6479.7, Commander Spock temporarily in command: After a relatively brief and uneventful visit to Sherman's Planet, during which time we were able to confirm the recently reported successes of the Federation assisted farming program in place there, we are enroute to Space Station K-7 to meet with Station Administrator Lurry. In response to the escalating conflict between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, Mister Lurry has taken it upon himself to remind the Federation Council and Starfleet Command that the nearest Klingon outpost is only three point two light years away from his station, and he has requested, somewhat adamantly, that Starfleet assign at least one Saladin-class destroyer there on a semi-permanent basis to defend the station against any potential attack. Our mission is to conduct an objective security assessment of the station and the surrounding sector to determine whether or not such a step, which the Klingon Empire would undoubtedly consider to be openly hostile and provocative, is warranted. Considering some of the other decisions they have made recently, I suspect that I already know what Starfleet Command's decision will be, regardless of what we might report.

"Commander Spock?" Lieutenant Palmer called out from communications, "I just got a call from a crewman down in the gym. There's some kind of trouble brewing between some of our people and the MACOs down there."

"Strike my last sentence from the log and end recording," Spock told the computer. Then he turned and looked partway over his shoulder toward Palmer and replied, "Send a security team down there, Lieutenant. Instruct them to ascertain the situation and report back to me before they interfere."

"Aye, sir."

One benefit to extended layovers that Doctor McCoy never failed to take advantage of was the fact that starbase Supply and Logistics officers always maintained plenty of medical supplies on hand—far more than the bases would ever need—ready and waiting for starship CMOs to take them off their hands. He'd done exactly that at Starbase Six, and as he stood in his storeroom, finally putting away the last of his latest haul, Kirk walked in behind him and asked, "Got a minute, Bones?"

“What can I do for you, Captain?” the doctor asked him coldly.

Kirk stepped up beside his closest friend. “Accept my sincere apology,” he replied. “I shouldn’t have snapped at you the way I did after the briefing the other day.”

McCoy stopped what he was doing and turned his eyes to his captain—to his friend—and answered in an instantly much warmer tone of voice, “Of course I will, Jim.” He grabbed a handful of bandages out of the container and took them over to a cabinet. “That’s what real friends do, you know,” he added as he opened the cabinet and started arranging the bandages inside. “They argue, they apologize, they accept one another’s apologies...” He pulled his hands out of the cabinet, along with a bottle of Saurian Brandy and two glasses. “...and then they toast the depth and resiliency of their friendship.”

Kirk grinned as he took the glasses so that McCoy could pour. “Toasting friendship is good,” he said.

“I couldn’t agree more,” McCoy tossed in as he started pouring.

“You just said friends accept *one another’s* apologies,” Kirk pointed out, licking his lips as he watched the brandy fill the glass. “Are you apologizing for something, too?”

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

“What for?”

“For pushing you into talking to me when you were under so much strain,” McCoy answered as he finished pouring.

McCoy set the bottle aside. “That’s also what real friends do, Bones,” Kirk told him, holding one of the glasses out to him, “and you’re perhaps the closest friend I’ve ever had. You have nothing to apologize for.”

McCoy accepted the glass and then tapped it to Kirk’s. “To friendship,” he said.

“To friendship,” Kirk repeated in agreement.

They drank.

“*Bridge to Captain Kirk*,” Spock’s voice spoke out over the intercom.

“Speaking of which...” Kirk said after he swallowed as he stepped over to the comm.-panel on the wall. He punched his fist down softly on the little white button, “Kirk here,” he replied. “Go ahead, Mister Spock.”

“*Captain, there is an unfortunate situation developing in the gym that requires your personal attention.*”

Kirk hesitated for a heartbeat, then asked, “Let me guess, Mister Spock. It involves our security forces and the MACOs?”

“*Affirmative, sir.*”

“All right. Notify Lieutenant Dickerson and have him meet me...”

“*Lieutenant Dickerson is already there, sir,*” Spock advised him. “*He is, in fact, at the center of the situation.*”

Kirk threw one of those ‘when it rains, it pours’ looks of his over at McCoy, who only shrugged his shoulders in response, then said, “I see. I’m on my way, Mister Spock. Kirk out.” The captain closed the channel, then faced McCoy and raised his arms in surrender and asked, “Why is it always the ones I specifically order to *avoid* trouble who end up in the middle of it?”

“Try not to be too hard on the boy, Jim,” McCoy suggested. Kirk only gulped the last of his brandy. “Remember, you feel the same way he does about our...guests.”

Kirk set his empty glass down on a shelf on his way out the door and told him, "I'll call you if I need you, Bones."

Lieutenant Dickerson and Sergeant Shiram had been going at it for several minutes, neither one of them gaining an advantage over the other, by the time Colonel Finnegan, who had been lifting weights in the next room, joined his troops in watching the match. Shortly after that, Dickerson had landed a blow that seemed to put Shirem off his game, and it only took the security chief another couple of minutes to finally soundly defeat the Andorian—a result that no one, including himself, had likely expected.

"Very well done, Lieutenant," Finnegan told the security chief as he approached him after the match. "Those who can last more than a few moments against Shirem are few and far between, and 'til now they've all been MACOs. I'm impressed."

"Thank you, sir," Dickerson replied as humbly as he could manage.

"How are yeh at high-G combat?"

"It was my specialty back at the academy, sir," Dickerson revealed, thinking right after he spoke that he probably shouldn't have admitted that. "However, I'm a little worn out at the moment."

"So am I," Finnegan claimed. "I've been liftin' weights for over half an hour."

"All due respect, sir, lifting weights isn't the same as..."

"Yeh defeated me troopers easily enough," the colonel pointed out, interrupting, and yeh put me best soldier down on his arse, which is somethin' I've never seen anyone do. I'm sure yeh've got somethin' left in the tank for me."

"Your troopers are first class opponents, sir," Dickerson told him, hoping that a little bit of flattery might get him out of his predicament. "I might have defeated them in the end this time, but I promise you there was nothing easy about it."

"So we're agreed then," Finnegan concluded. "We're both equally worn out."

"Well...yes, sir, but I..."

"Corporal," Finnegan called out as he turned and faced his men, "increase the gravity pull on these mats to two-G's."

"Right away, Colonel," the corporal replied as he hurried over to the control panel on the wall.

"Sir, you're a senior officer," Dickerson pointed out to the colonel when he spotted Captain Kirk slipping quietly into the room. "I'm a lieutenant. I don't think..."

"Do it for yer ship, Mister Dickerson," Finnegan challenged him. "Do it for the pride o' the Starship *Enterprise*." Dickerson looked over at Kirk, but got no reaction out of him at all. His captain just stood there and gazed back at him as poker-faced as ever, leaving the decision totally up to him. Then Finnegan added, "Unless o' course, yeh *have* no pride in the *Enterprise*, Lieutenant."

Dickerson turned his eyes back to the colonel and clenched his jaw. He no longer had a choice. He couldn't let that go. The captain would understand. "All right, Colonel," he said. "You're on. For the pride of the *Enterprise*."

Dickerson quickly responded in kind when Finnegan immediately took a stance that might have been offensive *or* defensive. The colonel attacked, but Dickerson managed to

counter his move and avoided a quick defeat. Then, with a tricky maneuver that Spock had once taught him, Dickerson got the best of a very surprised Finnegan, forced him off balance, and dropped him to his backside. The colonel looked up at him with both surprise and anger.

"I told you to leave me alone, Sean!"

Twenty-two year old Cadet Finnegan glared up at his opponent—that sniveling little bookworm farm boy plebe, freshman Cadet James Tiberius Kirk and smiled with satisfaction, even as he wiped the blood from his mouth. "Jimmy me boy, yeh're gonna regret that."

"You really need to put an end to this once and for all, Jim," one of Kirk's friendlier classmates spoke quietly into his ear.

Finnegan leapt back to his feet and rushed a surprised Cadet Kirk.

"Son-of-a..."

"AHHHHHH!" Finnegan screamed as he charged. He threw a punch and struck Kirk hard across the jaw in one fluid motion, knocking him backwards, off balance.

Dickerson had had enough. He wasn't going to win this one and he knew it. He was too tired—too worn out from his previous matches. The colonel's fist found his jaw and he fell to his hands and knees, seeing stars. He raised his head and looked around him, hoping to avoid passing out, and saw Captain Kirk approaching the colonel with his fists clenched and his eyes wide with anger.

"Colonel Finnegan!" the captain shouted.

"I'm all right, sir," Dickerson declared as the colonel looked back at the captain.

"As you were, Lieutenant," Kirk barked. "The match is over."

Finnegan offered his hand and said, "Allow me, Lieutenant," then helped Dickerson back to his feet as Kirk stopped beside them, making it a circle of three.

"Thank you, sir," Dickerson said to the colonel.

"My compliments on yer choice of security chiefs, Captain," Finnegan then said to Kirk. "Mister Dickerson here really knows his stuff."

Ignoring the colonel for the moment, Kirk met Dickerson's gaze and told him, "I want to see you in my quarters after you've cleaned up, Lieutenant."

"Understood, sir."

Kirk then turned his attention to Finnegan as one of his MACO troops handed him a towel. "And I'll talk to you later." And with that, Kirk turned and walked away.

"He just bloody canno' let it go," Finnegan mumbled just loud enough for Dickerson to hear, staring after Kirk as he flipped the towel around his neck.

Senior Cadet Finnegan stood at ease before Dean Roslyn's desk, his uniform still a bit disheveled, wishing beyond hope for some means of escape as the woman glared at him in silence and thinking that if she expelled him he'd make Kirk pay like he'd never paid before. She certainly wasn't a bad looking woman—he particularly liked her long red-brown hair—though she was probably twice his age or close to it, but she had a reputation for having been a tough as nails instructor and a real hard-ass dean when she needed to be, and Finnegan was genuinely worried.

"Cadet Sean Gavin Finnegan," she finally began as she pulled off her eyeglasses and set them down on her desk. "Bullying Freshman Cadet James Kirk...again. Fighting...again."

She looked up at him, met his worried gaze, and asked, "What do you have to say for yourself this time?"

"He had it comin'?" Finnegan offered.

"You'll address me as 'admiral' or 'ma'am!'" the woman barked as she sat forward in her chair, releasing her anger suddenly. "And stand at attention when I'm talking to you, Cadet! What, is this your first day?"

"Yes, ma'am!" Finnegan replied as he snapped to attention. "I mean, no, ma'am, this is no' me first day."

The dean stood up and walked out from behind her desk. "You're a fourth-year cadet on the verge of graduating, son," she reminded him, as if he needed to be reminded. "Do you have any idea how much Starfleet has invested in your training and education over the last four years?"

"No, ma'am."

"A lot more than you'll ever see over the next four years, I can tell you that," she informed him as she stepped closer. "I'm starting to think I should have kicked you out of here a long time ago and saved Starfleet the expense. If I do that now, Command is going to want to know why I waited so long. Especially when they see your disciplinary record!" she added with emphasis. "So the question remains..." she continued, reining her emotions in again, "what am I supposed to do with you now?" She started walking around him. "How do I solve this problem without throwing away the fleet's investment?"

"Tell me not to do it again, ma'am?" he suggested.

Roslyn practically jumped right into his face. "Do you think this is all a joke, Cadet?" she asked him angrily.

"No, ma'am," he answered regretfully.

"You're damn right it's not!" She backed off...a little...and took another moment to rein her emotions in once more. Then she told him, "The expulsion of a fourth-year cadet is a very serious matter."

"Expulsion, ma'am?" Finnegan asked her, growing genuinely afraid.

"That's just the beginning, Cadet," she told him as she started circling like a hungry vulture once more. "I could have you brought up on criminal charges for assault and battery if I wanted to, and I probably should."

"It won't happen again, ma'am, I swear," Finnegan promised desperately.

"You're damn right it won't," she confirmed, obviously having come to a decision of some kind. "As of this moment, you're expelled from Starfleet Academy. Your hopes of ever becoming a fleet officer are over." Finnegan drew a deep breath. "However," she continued, raising a hand to silence him before he could protest, then stopping and standing a respectful distance in front of him, "you've already earned enough credits to graduate with your class, so the only question remaining is whether or not we can find a way to salvage what's left and provide at least some return on Starfleet's investment."

"I won't enlist, ma'am," he told her almost before he could think it over. He'd come to the academy to earn a commission. If he couldn't serve Starfleet as an officer, he wouldn't serve at all. "If that's me only option, then I'm out all the way."

She started circling again. "As it happens, there might be an alternative to complete expulsion for a fighter like you...if you can convince me you're worth salvaging."

"An alternative, ma'am?"

"Yes, an alternative. The only one you've got where you can still earn a commission, I might add." She stopped and stood face-to-face with him again and asked, "Are you worth salvaging, Cadet?"

"Yes, ma'am," he answered quickly. "I swear I am."

"And if I decide to give you the opportunity to prove that to me, will you? Or will you only disappoint me again?"

"No, ma'am, I won't. I swear. Tell me what I have to do."

She held his gaze for a few moments—looked him deeply in the eye, and then told him to, "Stand at ease." Finnegan relaxed and stood at ease while Roslyn walked back around behind her desk and sat down. "Ever heard of the MACOs, Cadet?" she then asked him.

"The MACOs? Only in Fleet History class, ma'am," he replied honestly. "They used to serve as Starfleet's Security Forces, but under an entirely separate command."

"They still do in some places, and I think they might have a place for you."

"Yeh know, Lieutenant," the colonel said after a moment, "if yeh ever decide to leave the regular Security Forces, I could make a place for yeh on me team."

"I appreciate the offer, Colonel," Dickerson told him politely, appreciative, "but I'm happy right where I am."

"Well, the offer stands if yeh ever change yer mind, son. Better go an' get cleaned up now. Yeh don' want to keep yer captain waitin'."

"Yes, sir," Dickerson replied. Then, with a nod, he headed for the showers, but the Andorian sergeant stopped him and offered his hand.

"You fought well, Lieutenant," he said. "I thank you for the honor."

Dickerson smiled and shook the man's hand and replied, "Thank you, Sergeant."

A little while later, Dickerson stood at attention in front of Kirk's desk as ordered.

"You knew very well that I wanted to avoid problems between your people and the MACOs, Lieutenant," the captain reminded him, "yet you allowed yourself to be drawn into fighting with them anyway. Why?"

"All due respect, sir, that isn't what happened," the security chief replied. One of the things he liked most about Captain Kirk was that he always gave his people the opportunity to present their side of any story...as long as they did so in a professional manner.

"Then explain to me what *did* happen, Lieutenant."

And thus, the opportunity to present his side of the story. "Morale building, sir," he began. And then he further explained, "Both groups are well aware that at some point in the not too distant future we're going to end up working together. What happened in the gym did a lot more to break the ice between us than simple introductions could ever do. As a matter of fact, right after you left, sir, the colonel...offered me a job."

"He did what?" Kirk asked, standing up, clearly taken aback. "He offered you a job?"

"Yes, sir, but don't worry. I turned him down. I'm security chief aboard the Starship *Enterprise*—the finest ship in the fleet. I'm not going anywhere."

Kirk gazed at him for another moment, then said, "At ease, Lieutenant."

Dickerson stood at ease. "I just wanted to make them feel welcome, sir," he further explained. "Besides, sparring with the MACOs gave me the chance to learn something about their fighting style. If I ever go up against them again I'll know how to defeat them...the colonel included. I promise you that."

"I believe you will, Lieutenant," Kirk acknowledged with a grin.

"For the pride of the *Enterprise*, sir, just like the colonel said."

"I suspect you'll be a member of her crew for quite some time to come, Lieutenant," Kirk told him. "Dismissed."

Kirk remained standing and watched as the lieutenant left him alone and the door slid closed behind him. Then he muttered aloud to himself, "Sure would have been nice to see Finnegan eating the mat, though."

* * * * *

The day was sunny and warm, as bright and beautiful a day as San Francisco had ever known. The flowers were blooming, the birds were singing, and the sea was peaceful and calm. But none of that did anything to lighten Admiral Nogura's mood as he glanced around at all the people going about their business on his way across Starfleet Command's beautiful campus grounds. He knew that all of that serenity was going to fade as soon as he reached his destination. Once there, the world was going to feel much colder and literally be a lot darker. He hated that chamber—the 'dark hall,' he called it. The star chamber. That brood of vipers that was the audience hall of Section-31.

He'd walked faster than he'd intended, and before he knew it he was there, standing in that dimly lit room with no windows. He stood in front of a chair that had been meant for him, refusing to sit down, facing five personnel who sat in a single row, deep in the shadows ahead of him where he couldn't see their faces, behind a long, raised curved table. Their director, a middle-aged woman he estimated—that was all he knew about her, as he'd never even seen her face—sat in the center directly ahead of him.

"Welcome back, Admiral," she said. "Thank you for taking the time once again to come and see us. We wanted to thank you in person for your support of our efforts to assign a MACO unit to the *Enterprise*."

"Don't thank me for what you don't have," Nogura replied sharply. "I don't like all this cloak and dagger secrecy. I don't like it at all. Classified operations planned by unnamed operatives who don't even exist officially, conspiring in dark, hidden rooms. You people are a bad melodramatic cliché if there ever was one."

"All this cloak and dagger secrecy, as you call it, is necessary in order to prevent our section from being compromised," she explained to him, certainly not for the first time.

"Your section shouldn't exist in the first place," Nogura retorted. "If I had my way, you'd be disbanded immediately for what you recently tried to do. You're no good at all for the Federation."

"On the contrary, Admiral, we do much to preserve and defend the Federation," the first deputy argued.

“As I recall, Adolf Hitler, Kahn Noonien Singh, and Colonel Greene all rationalized their actions in that same way,” Nogura fired back.

“We protect freedom, Admiral,” the second deputy pointed out. “That sets us apart from those others.”

“Is that what you were doing when you carried out that whole bloodworm fiasco?” Nogura asked him, almost daring him to try to defend his position. “Protecting freedom by committing genocide?”

“That fiasco as you call it was Kirk’s fault,” the third deputy claimed. “If he’d have kept his big mouth shut instead of blowing the whistle to Kargh, no one would have been the wiser.”

“Kirk did *exactly* the right thing!” Nogura exclaimed.

“And no genocide would have been necessary,” the first deputy added. “One small demonstration would have been enough to stop the Klingons in their tracks. Kirk had no right giving them the cure.”

“Captain Kirk had *every* right to do what he did!” Nogura argued. “Preserving and defending the Federation by threatening genocide *destroys* the very fabric of the Federation from within! Section Thirty-One is a cancer that needs to be cut out!”

“I suggest you guard your words, Admiral,” the fourth deputy warned.

“You guard your own words!” Nogura shouted, unintimidated. “If you think I’m just some lackey who fears your power and cowers under your mystery the way almost everyone else does, you are sadly mistaken! *Epecially* now that you’ve so blatantly violated God knows how many Federation laws!” He paused to calm down a little bit, then continued, “Speaking of Federation laws, Starfleet Command is holding you directly responsible for the loss of the *Copernicus* with all hands. Sooner or later, you’ll all face serious repercussions. You can quote me on that.”

“It would be in your best interest to tread lightly, Admiral,” one of the deputies told him. He thought it was either the first or the fourth, but he couldn’t be sure which.

“If you’re trying to frighten me,” he replied, “you’re going to have to do better than that. Do you really think I’d be foolish enough to come here without a contingency plan for leaving?”

“Just offering you some friendly advice, Admiral,” that same deputy replied.

“Thank you, but you can take your friendly advice and shove it up your ass,” Nogura told whichever one of those deputies it was. Not that he really cared either way. “And if you *dare* challenge my authority...”

“Section Thirty-One has no intention of challenging your authority, Admiral,” their director assured him. “We’re all well aware of your standing in the fleet and we don’t want a confrontation with you.”

“Damn right you don’t.”

“And you’re absolutely right,” she continued. “That operation with the bloodworms was ill-conceived from the very beginning and should never have been given the go-ahead. As the director of Section Thirty-One, I accept full responsibility for it, to include the loss of the *Copernicus* and her crew.”

“And yet, as the director of Section Thirty-One and the person ultimately responsible, you’re still letting Commander Blodgett take the fall for you.”

“Commander Blodgett stepped well beyond the scope of his orders of his own accord, Admiral,” she told him. “If we were to allow that to go unpunished, we’d risk allowing discipline within the entire section to break down.”

“Besides,” one of the deputies interjected, “Blodgett’s a flaming idiot. Section Thirty-One is better off without him.”

“Are you even listening to yourself?” Nogura asked the woman, ignoring the deputy’s remark, though he tended to agree with it. “You’ll allow him to be punished for stepping beyond the scope of his orders...*your* orders...while the rest of you sit up there in the shadows and get away with committing offenses that are a thousand times worse?”

“Federation security requires that we remain in place,” the director replied by rote.

“I wholeheartedly disagree,” Nogura told her.

“A fact that you’ve made quite clear to us, Admiral, more than once” she returned, “but you cannot deny the simple fact that *something* needs to be done. The Klingons continue to cross into our space and attack our ships, and the Organians haven’t lifted a finger to stop them or shown any sign that they intend to do so.”

“And now we’ve begun receiving intelligence reports indicating there’s some kind of political unrest within the empire,” the second deputy added.

“These isolated battles we find ourselves engaged in have already cost us two ships and several hundred lives,” the fourth deputy added on top of that. “The *Enterprise* damn near became the third.”

“Yes it did,” Nogura acknowledged adamantly. “Thanks to *you!*”

“And instability within the Klingon Empire can only make things worse,” the second deputy went on.

“So far we’ve destroyed more of their ships than they have of ours,” the third deputy added to the argument, “but if we don’t do something drastic, Admiral, this cold war turned lukewarm is going to get real hot, real fast.”

“And that’s the real reason we wanted to talk to you, Admiral,” the director told him, finally coming to the point...he hoped. “We’ve developed a plan of action, but we need your help again to pull it off.”

“What kind of help? What’s your plan?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer either those questions until you agree at the very least to keep what I tell you to yourself, regardless of whether or not you actually agree to help us.”

Nogura snickered. Of course. “And if I don’t?” he asked her.

“Then we’ll be forced to find someone else who will,” she replied, “which *could* have the unfortunate side effect of making your pending new assignment to Starfleet Command no longer necessary.”

“Don’t you *dare* threaten me,” Nogura warned her.

“I’d prefer not to, Admiral, but if you force us to go looking for someone else...”

“And just who else do think can do for you what I can, if I choose to?” he asked her. “When you needed MACOs assigned to the *Enterprise* and the *Enterprise* assigned to neutral zone patrol, you came to me for one reason—because no one else could do it for you.”

“And we appreciate you helping us out with that.”

“I didn’t do it to help you,” he told her. “I did it because I happen to agree with your assessment that we cannot allow the Klingons *or* the Romulans to perceive any weakness in

our forces. It makes sense for the *Enterprise* to be assigned to the Klingon border...for now. But make no mistake, if and when that changes I'll pull her off the line and reassign her in a second, and I won't give a damn how any of you feel about it."

"Admiral Nogura," the third deputy spoke up again, "please don't make the mistake of thinking you're *that* important to us. There are other admirals in the fleet."

"And don't *you* make the mistake of thinking that I serve this cowards' committee at its whim," Nogura fired back. Then he addressed the director again, saying, "One word from me to the fleet commandant and Section Thirty-One is history. You know that. Trust me, you need me more than Starfleet needs *any* of you."

"If it were that simple, you'd have given that word already and we'd be gone," one of the deputies pointed out.

"Are *you* threatening *us* now, Admiral?" the director inquired.

"You're damn right I am," he freely admitted, "and if I were you I'd take heed."

"Admiral Nogura," she said after a long sigh, "according to the original United Earth Starfleet Charter, article fourteen, section thirty-one..."

"Can easily be amended," he threw out before she could finish, knowing, of course, that that wasn't what she'd been intending to say, "or even eliminated altogether by authority of the Commander, Starfleet. I know. I've read it, several times."

"This confrontation is pointless, Director," the fourth deputy opined. "We all want the same thing here. We all want to protect the Federation."

"And in *that* spirit and that spirit *only*," Nogura emphasized, "I've put my best captain and the flagship of the Federation in a position that jeopardizes the very principles of the Federation. As you strive to take full advantage of my *temporary* cooperation, I suggest you keep this in mind. Flying the flag in the faces of our enemies is just as likely to provoke them as it is to stave them off. Be sure that while you try to serve in the Federation's best interests and avoid an all-out war, you don't bring about its escalation instead." He turned his back and headed for the exit. "When you're ready to tell me what kind of help you require from me and why, you know where to find me."

"Something needs to be done about that man," the third deputy thought aloud as soon as Nogura had gone.

"You're kidding, right?" the fourth deputy asked him. "That's Admiral Heihachiro Nogura you're talking about. That man *is* Starfleet."

"Agreed," their director put in. "The last time an admiral amassed that much power he confounded Thirty-One for decades."

"Nogura is no Jonathan Archer," the third deputy pointed out.

"No, he's not," the director agreed. "He's worse. We can't hurt him, but he can surely hurt us, and badly."

"So what? We sit here and do nothing?" the second deputy asked.

"We wait and we watch for now," the director replied. "Let's see how the situation on the *Enterprise* plays itself out. With any luck the MACOs will prove themselves valuable and open the door for us to have them assigned to all the ships in the fleet. Once that's done, we'll have all the right people in all the right places. Then we can act."

CHAPTER 5

Commander Spock sat in command of the *Enterprise* again while Captain Kirk tended to ship's business elsewhere. There had been a few incidents over the last few hours between the MACOs and members of the ship's crew, but nothing too major. Overall, integration of the two groups had proceeded more smoothly since the incident in the gym than they had been proceeding before and things were relatively quiet...which, unfortunately, often meant...

"Mister Spock," Lieutenant Palmer called out from communications as she turned and faced the first officer. "I'm picking up what sounds a little like a distress call, but it's an odd sort of signal and is coming in very faint and off-channel. I'm only receiving bits and pieces of it, but it seems to be repeating—possibly automated. Definitely not a standard signal."

"Have you checked Klingon channels, Lieutenant?" the first officer asked her.

"Yes, sir," she replied, "and Romulan channels as well. It's not coming in over *any* known channel, ours *or* theirs."

"Mister Kyle?" Spock inquired of the helmsman on duty, who was already peering into his tactical scope.

"I'm not seeing anything on sensors, sir," Kyle reported.

Spock turned the chair around toward his fellow Vulcan, Lieutenant Xon, who'd been manning the science station for him. "Mister Xon," he said, "tie sensors and scanners into the Epsilon-Nine neutral zone monitoring probe network and attempt to triangulate on the source of the signal."

"Aye, sir," Xon replied neutrally. He peered into the scope and manipulated a number of the science station's sensor/scanner controls, then reported after a few moments, "I have it, Commander. Alien vessel, configuration unknown, approaching Federation space at sub-light speed from inside the neutral zone. It appears to be drifting on momentum only—no apparent propulsion—and will cross into Federation space thirty-six thousand three-hundred twenty kilometers ahead...mark."

"Forward those coordinates to navigation, Lieutenant," Spock instructed his substitute as he faced forward again. "Navigator," he continued, speaking to Lieutenant Rand, who was manning that post for the time being, "set course for those coordinates. Mister Kyle, get us there *before* that vessel enters Federation space."

"Aye, sir."

"Lieutenant Palmer," Spock continued, looking back over his shoulder, "call Captain Kirk to the bridge."

A few minutes later, as Kirk and DeSalle stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge, Xon reported, "Alien vessel now entering visual range, Mister Spock."

"On viewer, Mister Kyle," Kirk ordered as he and DeSalle approached their stations. Spock stood up and stepped aside while Kyle followed the captain's order.

As Kirk and DeSalle took their seats and Kyle stepped away, two rather stubby looking alien vessels of a design never encountered before, seemingly identical in design to one another and looking as though they had been tethered together somehow, appeared on the main screen. Seconds later it became apparent that they were rotating slowly around a center

axis point between them. They appeared to have been damaged in battle, pretty heavily in some areas, their running lights were flickering and blinking at irregular intervals, and they were leaking what appeared to be raw plasma from what might have been their warp nacelles near their sterns.

“Analysis, Mister Xon,” Kirk requested.

“Two distinct vessels, apparently identical in design, Captain,” the lieutenant said. “Both are quite obviously heavily damaged. They are tethered together by some kind of...”

“Tethered?” Kirk interrupted, turning his eyes on the junior science officer. “Tethered how, Lieutenant? Energy filaments, like those the Tholians use in their webs?”

“Negative, sir. Solid matter—completely inert and obviously very strong. No energy output detected.”

“What caused the damage?”

“Preliminary data indicates damage caused by multiple impacts of Klingon torpedoes and heavy disruptor fire.”

“Whoever they are, I like them already,” DeSalle interjected from the helm.

Rand looked over at him from navigation and said, “If they survived a Klingon attack, let’s hope they like us, too.”

Kirk turned and looked back at the young communications officer. “Lieutenant, tie in the universal translator and hail them. Identify us fully and request they do the same, then advise them we’re standing by to render any assistance they might need as soon as they cross into Federation space.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Opinion, Mister Spock?” Kirk asked his first officer, who had remained standing at his side.

“Their ships are a design we have not encountered before, Captain,” Spock replied, stating the obvious. “The apparent fact that Klingon forces fired on them indicates they are likely not Klingons themselves, despite the fact that they are approaching from within the neutral zone. Unless, of course, they are criminals on the run.”

“Citizens of a conquered world?” Kirk suggested as an alternative. “Beings from the other side of the empire perhaps?”

“Either theory is possible, Captain. Perhaps even both.”

“Lieutenant Palmer, any response from...”

The *Enterprise* rocked suddenly under apparent weapons fire that thundered through the hull, throwing Spock into the portside steps, nearly throwing Kirk from his chair, and tossing everyone else on the bridge away from their stations as sparks exploded from some of them. Then, when the ship rocked the other way just as suddenly, Xon lost his grip on the edge of his console and fell back and struck his head hard against one of the railing posts behind him with a *CRACK*. Spock recovered and hurried to the young Vulcan’s side as the ship finally righted itself and Kirk picked himself up off the deck, not even knowing when he’d fallen to it.

“That came from one of the alien vessels, Captain!” Rand exclaimed.

“Red alert,” Kirk ordered loudly. “Shields up.” He turned first to Lieutenant Palmer, “Call a medical team up here!” and then to the young man just returning to the engineering station. “Engineer, damage report!”

“No reports of damage so far, sir,” the young man replied as he checked his board. “Direct impact on deck two, no appreciable damage. Hull integrity holding steady at one hundred percent.” Another, more minor impact shook the bridge, and the engineer rechecked his readouts. “Still no damage, sir. Shields holding steady at a hundred percent.”

“So they can shake us up real well, but they can’t hurt us,” Kirk concluded.

“It appears so, sir,” the young man confirmed.

Kirk looked over at Spock, who was looking back at him with ‘I don’t agree’ written all over his face while he continued to tend to Lieutenant Xon. “Spock?”

“More likely they have simply *chosen* not to hurt us, Captain.”

“Explain.”

“If this demonstration were indicative of the aliens’ full capabilities, those Klingons who fired on them could and likely would have destroyed them long before they reached this area. Clearly, they did not.”

“Why fire at all?” Kirk inquired. “All we did was hail them.”

“We have encountered races before who perceived our hails to be a form of attack,” Spock reminded the captain. “Perhaps these aliens have done that as well.”

“I believe Mister Spock is right about that, sir,” Palmer offered. “The aliens probably thought our hail was an attempt to compromise and infiltrate their computer systems.”

“Explain, Lieutenant.”

“Our primary communications channels fall in between theirs, sir, same as theirs fall in between ours. I think they might have thought we were transmitting malignant code on a sub-channel in an attempt to infiltrate their systems.”

That certainly made sense to him. “What about that, Spock?” he asked.

“Speculative, but a flawlessly logical hypothesis, Captain.”

The *Enterprise* rocked and rumbled slightly several more times as Lieutenant Uhura and Ensign Kirk stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge and replaced the personnel who had been manning their stations, then again, twice more, when the medical team arrived with a stretcher and took over caring for Xon from Spock, who then went to work at his station.

“I’ve had just about enough of this,” Kirk decided aloud. He turned to his nephew and ordered, “Peter—Mister Kirk—arm all phaser banks and have photon torpedoes standing by.”

“Aye, Captain,” Peter acknowledged.

“Mister Rand,” Kirk then addressed, “target their weapons only.”

“Standing by, sir,” his former yeoman replied.

DeSalle looked back over his shoulder at Kirk, clearly inquiring as to whether or not *he* should take fire control over from Rand without having to say a word. Kirk understood the helmsman’s concern, but Rand had to get her hands dirty sooner or later. He met DeSalle’s gaze and shook his head slightly, and the helmsman let it go.

“Captain, the alien vessels are still inside the neutral zone,” Spock pointed out.

“Your point, Spock?” Kirk asked, his eyes now glued to the main viewscreen.

“Given the current political climate,” the Vulcan began as the medics carried Xon off the bridge on their stretcher, “if we fire our weapons into the neutral zone for any reason, the Klingons will almost certainly consider it a formal declaration of war.”

This time Kirk did look over at his first officer. “We’re *already* at war, Mister Spock, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“An undeclared war, Captain,” Spock clarified, “which so far has consisted of a small number of limited engagements, all of which have been fought on our side of the neutral zone, thus allowing the Federation to claim the moral high ground, as it were. Were we to carry the fight into the neutral zone at this time...”

“War is war, Spock,” Kirk argued, “regardless of its galactic coordinates. Hundreds of lives have already been lost...on *both* sides.”

“Further escalating the conflict by firing our weapons into the neutral zone will not change that, Captain.”

Kirk exhaled sharply, then got up and walked over to the railing near Spock’s station, and grasped it with both hands. He wasn’t accustomed to having his officers argue against his orders so extensively, especially so publically, and he wasn’t about to start letting them now. Not even Spock. “Scotty just finished putting the old girl back together, Spock,” he reminded his first officer, speaking low so that no one else would hear. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to let someone tear her apart again. And in case you’ve forgotten, Kargh attacked *us* without provocation that day.”

“I have not forgotten, Captain,” Spock assured him. “I have also not forgotten that for reasons unknown, the Organians have not stopped any of the recent attacks. It is therefore logical to assume, given the Klingons’ aggressive nature, that they are patrolling the neutral zone at this very moment, awaiting any excuse to strike once more, and that if they do, the Organians will again choose not to interfere.”

“I’m open to suggestions, Mister Spock.”

“If the aliens are able to scan us, perhaps seeing that we have armed our weapons but chosen *not* to fire will serve as sufficient evidence of our desire for peace and dissuade them from taking further aggressive action. Now that we have done just that, I suggest we wait to see if they stand down on their own.”

“All right, Spock,” Kirk agreed after he thought about it for a moment. “We’ll play it your way.” He returned to the center seat, then turned it around to face the communications station. “Lieutenant Uhura, any indication *they’re* trying to contact *us*?”

“No, sir, but the automated signal Lieutenant Palmer was monitoring has stopped.”

“I don’t get it,” Kirk said as he turned to face forward again. “They were attacked and crippled by the Klingons, but left alive to drift through space. Why? They sent out a distress signal and then attacked us when we answered it. Again, why?”

“A classic bait and attack, Captain Kirk.”

Kirk and everyone else on the bridge looked to find that Colonel Finnegan, dressed now in full MACO camouflage, had just stepped off the lift onto the bridge, along with two *Enterprise* security guards and Lieutenant Chekov. The guards posted themselves on either side of the lift doors while Finnegan and Chekov both approached Kirk.

“What are you doing on my bridge, Colonel?” Kirk asked him as Chekov stepped past him to relieve Rand at navigation.

“Yer ship has been attacked, Captain,” the colonel replied matter-of-factly. “I came to let yeh know my troops are standin’ by to do whatever might have to be done.”

“We’re not going to need you *or* your troops,” Kirk informed him. Then he looked up at Uhura and asked, “Lieutenant, can you set your equipment to transmit a clear signal on the same sub-channel the aliens were transmitting on?”

“Easily, sir,” she replied as though it should have been obvious.

“Do it, and then try hailing them again.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“As I was sayin’ Jimmy-boy,” Finnegan jumped in once more, “what yeh were just describin’ when I got here is a classic ambush technique. Frankly, with all yer experience aboard starships, I’m a little surprised yeh fell for it.”

“What the hell do you suggest we do, Colonel,” Kirk asked him impatiently, “attack an apparently weaker and already partially crippled opponent who also happens to be the subject of a first-contact situation? Without even *trying* to talk to them first?”

“Crippled by whom, Jimmy-boy?” Finnegan then asked him in return, his tone filled with defiance. “The Klingons? If these aliens are really so much weaker than we are, why didn’ the Klingons already destroy ‘em outright?”

Kirk glanced over at Spock, who only raised an eyebrow in return, then looked back to Finnegan. “Have you been listening in on my bridge, Colonel?”

“Captain!” Uhura interjected. “We’re receiving a response from the aliens, sir!”

“Let’s hear it, Lieutenant,” Kirk ordered, setting his discussion with Finnegan aside, at least for the moment.

Everyone listened, expressions of utter confusion and lack of understanding finding their ways to their faces quickly when nothing but unintelligible squeaky, squealing gibberish came over the channel. After a few seconds of it, Kirk gestured to Uhura to cut the audio.

“Audio off, sir,” she confirmed as soon as the speakers fell silent.

Kirk turned his eyes to his first officer again. “Spock?”

“The universal translator obviously does not recognize their language, Captain. It will take time for it to...”

“How long?”

“An accurate estimate is not possible, Captain,” Spock advised him. “There are too many variables to consider.”

“Maybe they’re speakin’ gibberish on purpose, Jimmy-boy,” Finnegan suggested, his tone condescending. “Their response *could* be meant to distract yeh.”

Kirk glared at his old nemesis. “Get off my bridge, Colonel.”

“Captain, the colonel’s suggestion, while offered in a hostile and somewhat less than helpful manner, is not without merit,” Spock advised him.

Kirk flashed Spock an angry ‘whose side are you on’ look, then inquired as an idea came to mind, “Mister Spock, you used the ship’s equipment to get us a live covert picture of a Romulan bridge a few years ago. Any chance you do the same for these aliens without them detecting it?”

“Possibly, Captain,” Spock replied. Then he turned his eyes to Uhura. “Miss Uhura, you will please tie into my station.”

“Try to break into their records while you’re at it, Lieutenant,” Kirk told her. “If we can download their language files, maybe the translator can make quicker work of it.”

Spock looked back over at Kirk again. “I remind you, Captain, that it was very likely the aliens’ mistaken belief that we were taking such action earlier that triggered their attack.”

“Noted, Spock. Get on with it.”

Spock’s eyebrow climbed his forehead once more. “Very well.”

“Yeh should download all yeh can on their weapons and defenses, too,” Finnegan recommended.

“I thought I told you to get off my bridge,” Kirk said in response.

But Finnegan apparently wasn't going to be so easily dismissed. “They've already fired on us, Captain!” he reminded Kirk. “That makes ‘em the enemy, at least for now! Yeh need to gather all the intelligence on their capabilities that yeh possibly can!”

‘*Captain,*’ Kirk noted. *He called me ‘Captain’ instead of ‘Jimmy-boy’ that time. He’s swallowing his pride in an attempt to influence my decisions.* “How many starships have you commanded, Colonel?” he asked him.

“None, o’ course, but I’ve...”

“Then don’t stand there and tell me what I need to do. In fact, for the *third* time, get the *hell* off of my...”

The *Enterprise* rocked hard under a new round of weapons fire, *much* more violently than it had before, tossing everyone all over the bridge. Grunts and shouts and exclamations and cries of pain sounded all around Kirk as he looked to the engineering officer, both of them trying to pick themselves up off the deck against continued rumbling and rocking and rolling and shuddering.

“Damage report!” Kirk demanded.

“Forward shields down, sir!” the engineer shouted back to him, reading his board as he braced himself against the console’s edge. “Minor damage to deck five forward!”

Kirk grabbed hold of his chair and rose to his feet as the *Enterprise* continued to rock and rumble. “How the hell did they...” Kirk fell into his chair as the *Enterprise* rocked under another hit. Then the navigation console blew, showering Chekov in sparks as he leapt from his chair, shielding his face, apparently unhurt. “Spock, Uhura, stop what you’re doing!”

The attack stopped almost immediately and Chekov resumed his station, patting small fires out with his bare hands.

“Direct hit on the deflector dish, Captain,” the engineer reported. “Caused a massive power surge but did minimal damage.”

“Minimal damage?” Chekov asked as though the engineer were completely out of his mind. “Tell that to my navigation console.”

“Spock?” Kirk inquired.

“Records probe abandoned, Captain,” the first officer reported. “And I believe that we have discovered how the aliens got away from the Klingons.”

“Yeah, no kidding. Mister DeSalle, get those shields back up as fast as you can.”

“Trying, sir,” DeSalle replied as he worked.

“Maintaining all weapons on standby, Captain,” Ensign Kirk tossed in.

“Noted, Ensign,” Kirk acknowledged. “Mister Chekov, lock phasers on their engines in case they’re playing possum.”

“Aye, that’s more like it now,” Finnegan interjected, smiling with satisfaction.

“Arm and load torpedoes and target their weapons arrays,” Kirk continued. “Prepare to return fire the next time they...”

The *Enterprise* rocked again under renewed though strangely somewhat less intense weapons fire.

“Direct hit!” Ensign Kirk shouted. “Forward phaser emitters are offline!”

“Mister Chekov, fire torpedoes!” Kirk ordered. “One full spread!”

“Aye, Keptin. Firing!”

All eyes not otherwise occupied looked up at the main screen and watched as three of the *Enterprise*’s very lethal photon torpedoes shot into view, glowing like miniature suns, and raced toward the alien vessels. The aliens’ crimson beam weapon lashed out like a flaming sword and destroyed the first torpedo, detonating it barely halfway to its target, its brilliant white light forcing everyone to shield their eyes and look away. The second torpedo followed a second later, and then the third.

“No impact, Keptin!” Chekov exclaimed, reporting the obvious. “All three torpedoes vere destroyed vell short of the target!”

Standing and gazing into his scope, Spock reported, “Scanners show one alien vessel targeting the bridge, Captain.” Then he stood straight and looked over at the captain. “And we have no forward shields to absorb the impact.”

CHAPTER 6

“Mister DeSalle, lock viewer on the alien vessels and come about one-hundred sixty degrees to port and divert whatever forward shield power we have left to aft.”

“Aye, sir,” DeSalle acknowledged as he complied. “Viewer locked. Coming about.”

“Mister Chekov, lock starboard and aft phasers on their weapons and prepare to fire.”

“Aye, Keptin,” Chekov acknowledged as he, too, complied with the captain’s orders without question. “Targeting and locking phasers.”

The *Enterprise* rocked under another direct hit.

“Starboard phasers fire!”

Chekov fired the starboard phasers, and as the *Enterprise* pivoted to port, sluggishly after all the hits she had taken, the view on the forward screen continued shifting toward starboard, remaining fixed on the alien vessels. The starship’s starboard shields absorbed or deflected all of the energy from the aliens’ weapons that they could and began to glow under the salvo, and as the view continued shifting toward aft...

“Aft phasers, fire!”

Chekov fired the aft phasers, and as the *Enterprise* neared completion of her turn, her aft shields began to glow as brightly under the continuing alien barrage as whatever was left of those that barely continued to protect her starboard. Then, squinting his eyes against that intensifying glow as he tried to look beyond it, Kirk saw the aliens vessels’ weapons emitters explode suddenly and sighed with relief when their weapons ceased their assault.

“Direct hit,” Spock reported, gazing into his scope. “All aliens’ weapons arrays have been destroyed.”

“Cease fire, Mister Chekov,” Kirk ordered immediately. “All hands, stand down to condition yellow.” Kirk looked over at Spock, who was still peering into his scope, his eyes awash in its blue glow. “Any danger of a hull breach in those areas of their ships, Spock?”

“No significant decrease to structural integrity apparent,” Spock replied. “However, their trajectory has been altered significantly as a result of the explosions.” He stood straight and faced Kirk. “Their momentum will carry them across the border into Federation space in approximately twenty-five seconds, dangerously close to our current position.”

Kirk faced forward again. “Mister DeSalle, back us off. I want some distance between us and them. Mister Chekov, can you bring tractor beam control up on your board?”

Chekov checked his board, then answered, “Aye, Keptin, but my nawigation deflector control systems are shot.”

“Noted. Grab the alien vessels as soon as they cross into Federation space. Stop their momentum, then release them immediately.”

“Yeh’re lettin’ ‘em in, Jimmy?” Finnegan exclaimed, seemingly shocked by the idea. “After they’ve already shown us their aggressive intentions?”

“We’re as unknown to them as they are to us, Colonel,” Kirk reminded him. “Their intentions might simply have been to defend themselves against a perceived attack.”

“Or they might intend to destroy yer ship,” Finnegan countered. “Yeh’ve already seen how fast they can collapse yer shields!”

“What the hell do you expect me to do, Colonel,” Kirk asked him, growing angrier, “blow them out of space? Past all the shooting this is still a first-contact situation! I have to at least *try* to make peaceful contact with...”

“Make peaceful contact, yeh say!” Finnegan interrupted, matching Kirk’s tone of voice. “By destroyin’ their weapons?”

Kirk very nearly blew up at the MACO, but held himself in check. He hesitated for a moment to bring his temper and his tone under control, then said, “You listen to me, Colonel. I will *not*...”

“Tractoring alien wessels now, Keptin,” Chekov reported.

“Yeh asked me what I expect yeh to do, Jimmy?” Finnegan asked him. “As captain o’ this starship, I expect yeh to do whatever yeh have to do to defend the Federation against potential enemy invaders. But now that yeh’ve failed to live up to that responsibility and have allowed hostile aliens into Federation space, yeh leave me with no choice. I’ll have to lead me MACOs in a boardin’ action against ‘em.”

“There will be no boarding action, Colonel,” Kirk firmly declared.

“That’s not yer call to make, Jimmy-boy.”

“Like you said, Colonel, I’m the captain of this starship. That *makes* it my call to make and I’m not convinced these aliens are truly hostile at all. Now I’m *not* going to tell you again to *get the hell off my bridge!*”

“Captain Kirk,” the colonel tried again, speaking more calmly as he ignored his order to vacate the bridge, “as yeh’re well aware, the Romulans have been testin’ some powerful new weapons and the Klingons have been crossin’ the neutral zone border into our space and attackin’ us for months. On top o’ that, some of our member worlds’ economies are already collapsin’, or *have* collapsed, and those same Klingons are movin’ in and takin’ over. The Federation canno’ afford to have yet *another* enemy threatenin’ it.”

Kirk looked Finnegan in the eye for another few seconds, then turned his eyes to the security officers flanking the turbolift doors. “Security, remove this man from my bridge!” he ordered.

The very serious looking security officers stepped forward. Finnegan threw his hands up in surrender and said as he turned toward them, “I’m goin’, I’m goin’.”

Kirk watched while Finnegan stepped up onto the outer ring and the guards flanked him and walked him back to the lift. The doors opened and one of them stepped in with him while the other resumed his post to one side as the doors closed. Finally rid of the unwelcome distraction, Kirk returned to the business at hand. “Lieutenant Uhura, how’s that translation coming?” he asked.

“Nothing intelligible yet, Captain,” she reported.

“I don’t know who’s worse,” Kirk then remarked. “Them or Finnegan.”

As soon as the turbolift doors closed them off from the bridge, the security officer, an ensign, asked, “Anywhere in particular you’d like to go, Colonel?”

“Hangar deck,” Finnegan replied. “I’d like to check on me birds.”

The ensign grabbed hold of one of the handles and turned it, then told the computer, “Hangar deck,” and the lift started to descend.

“He’s leadin’ yeh to yer deaths, yeh know,” Finnegan commented.

The ensign looked at him, then asked, “You mean Captain Kirk?”

“Aye.”

“Don’t bet on it, sir,” the ensign said with a grin. “I’ve been with the captain since he took command of this ship. He’s gotten us out of a lot worse scrapes than this.”

Finnegan looked at the man’s sleeve. “Yeh’ve been with Kirk since he took command and yer still an ensign?”

The ensign’s grin vanished and he looked away. “I never said I was perfect.”

The lift slowed to a stop and then started moving laterally.

“He’s been lucky, yer Captain Kirk,” Finnegan opined.

“I disagree, sir.”

“O’ course yeh do, Ensign. He’s yer captain.”

The ensign looked back at him again. “If you’re accusing me of blind devotion, sir, you’re wrong. Captain Kirk has earned his crew’s faith and trust a hundred times over.”

“Aye, but he’s still a human bein’,” Finnegan pointed out, meeting the ensign’s glare. “Humans make mistakes, Ensign, and he’s makin’ a bloody big one now.”

“If so, sir, he’ll still pull us through it in the end, and he’ll probably have the aliens joining the Federation by the time he’s done, too.”

“Now *that* sounds like blind devotion,” Finnegan told him as the lift slowed to a stop again and then started to descend once more.

“Well-earned confidence and trust, Colonel,” the ensign countered.

“Yer faith in yer captain is an admirable trait, Ensign. I’ll give yeh that much.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Aye. Worthy of a MACO, in fact. Ever thought about joinin’ the MACOs?”

“Joining them?” the ensign asked. “I never even knew they still existed until you folks came aboard.”

“We could bring yer fightin’ skills up to a whole new level.”

“Lieutenant Dickerson sees to it we get good training, sir.”

“Aye, I’ve seen the evidence o’ that.” The lift slowed to a stop and started moving laterally again. “Still, I’m always lookin’ for good security officers to bring over to the teams. The duty’s like nothin’ else in Starfleet.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“So, are yeh interested?”

The lift slowed to a stop, the doors opened, and Finnegan led the ensign out into the corridor, then looked off to one side as they start walking.

“Thank you, sir, but no thank you,” the ensign answered the colonel’s last question. “I do appreciate the offer, but I’m perfectly happy right where I am.” Finnegan looked off to the other side. “I work for a good chief, I have the best C-O in the fleet...”

Finnegan whirled suddenly around and backhanded the ensign across his face with his right fist, knocking him backwards. The ensign recovered quickly and threw a right hook, but Finnegan blocked it with his forearm and then counterpunched the ensign across the jaw, sending him spinning. The ensign turned that to his advantage and countered with a spinning back kick, but Finnegan blocked that as well and held on to the younger man’s leg, then stepped in and slammed his elbow down on the ensign’s knee, probably dislocating it. The

ensign leapt into the air and whirled as he cried out in pain and kicked with his other leg, striking Finnegan on the side of his head as he fell hard to the deck, knocking him into the bulkhead and then down to the deck as well. Then, when both men had risen back to their feet, he bull-rushed the colonel as best he could—his knee threatened to give out under his weight—but the colonel grabbed hold of him when he slammed into him, even as he started falling backwards, and then kicked him up over his head. The ensign landed hard on his back with a thud and Finnegan leapt back to his feet, ready for more.

The ensign rose back to his feet as well, though a little more unsteadily, and faced the colonel. He charged again, but Finnegan sidestepped him and punched him across the jaw as he passed, knocking him unconscious before he even hit the deck.

Finnegan stood over the ensign and gazed down at him as he pulled his communicator out from under his shirt, flipped it open, and said, without waiting for any sort of response, “Shirem. Beta-alpha-one immediate. Initiate.”

“Mister Chekov,” Kirk pushed impatiently.

“Just another minute or so, Keptin,” the navigator assured him. “Those wessels are surprisingly high in mass for their size.”

Kirk sighed, then pressed the call button on the arm of his chair. “Kirk to sickbay.”

“*Sickbay, McCoy here,*” the response came quickly.

“How’s Lieutenant Xon, Bones?”

Concerned about his roommate’s condition—he hadn’t asked to share quarters with the Vulcan, but having done so for some time now, he had grown to admire and respect the guy, if not actually to like him as a friend—Ensign Kirk turned his chair and faced his uncle, hoping to overhear the doctor’s answer...and hoping that the news would be good.

“*Superficial laceration to the back of the scalp and a mild concussion, Jim. He’ll be fine in a day or two.*”

“That’s good to hear,” Kirk said, relieved. Then he asked, “Any other casualties?”

“*Just a few cuts and bruises and one broken arm, Jim. Nothing too severe.*”

“Thanks, Bones. Kirk out.” He closed the channel, then turned his attention to the helmsman and asked, “How are those shields coming, Mister DeSalle?”

“Restored but still weak, sir,” DeSalle replied. “Thirty-eight percent and increasing, but *slowly.*”

“That’s not good enough, Mister.”

“I’ll...try to speed things up, sir,” DeSalle told him, though how the captain expected him to influence the rate of the energy build-up, he had no idea.

Kirk noticed Peter still looking at him and asked, “Something, Mister Kirk?”

“No, sir,” his nephew replied.

“Then pay attention to your board,” the captain barked.

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir,” the younger Kirk said as he quickly turned back to his console, seemingly embarrassed.

Spock approached Kirk and stepped down to his side. “Are you all right, Captain?” he asked quietly.

“I’m fine, Spock,” Kirk assured him. “Why do you ask?”

"You seem...overly agitated," Spock replied tactfully. Kirk looked up at him, his gaze prompting him to explain, "While a certain level of agitation is to be expected, given our current circumstances, you were uncharacteristically...short...with both Mister DeSalle and your nephew just now."

"DeSalle can do better," Kirk briefly explained, "and Peter's asked me over and over again not to treat him any differently than I do the other members of the crew. We're still at condition yellow and he wasn't watching his station. I corrected his error, nothing more."

"Mister DeSalle can do nothing to influence the rate of energy build-up in the shields, Captain," Spock countered, prompting DeSalle to silently mouth his thanks, "and I doubt that Mister Kirk's desire to be treated like any other member of the crew extends to being singled out for verbal discipline in front of his peers. Are you sure you were not taking the hostility you feel toward Colonel Finnegan out on them?"

"I notice you're not watching your station, either, Mister Spock" Kirk said.

Spock's posture straightened even more than usual, and with a single eyebrow raised and an acknowledging, "Indeed," he turned and walked back to his station.

"Captain?" DeSalle called, his hands dancing over his controls as soon as the telltale white light started blinking on his board, "the hangar bay doors are opening."

"Close them, Mister DeSalle."

"I'm on it, sir, but the MACO assault shuttles are already launching. The doors aren't going to reverse and close fast enough to stop them."

Kirk drew a deep breath quickly and exhaled sharply. "We really need to address that issue one of these days." Then he turned to communications. "Lieutenant Uhura..."

"Channel already open, sir," she told him, having anticipated his next order.

Kirk slammed his fist down on the button. "MACO shuttles, this is Captain Kirk. You are *not* authorized to launch. Return to your berths immediately."

DeSalle looked back at Kirk briefly. "They're out, sir. Both of them."

"MACO shuttles, you are ordered to return to the *Enterprise*." No response. Nothing. "Lieutenant Uhura..."

"They're receiving, sir," Uhura advised him. "They're just not answering."

"Tractor beam, Mister Chekov, as soon as you've stopped the aliens' momentum."

"Aye, Keptin," Chekov replied. "That's done. Redirecting now."

"Assault shuttles taking evasive action," DeSalle reported as he gazed into his scope.

"I got vone of them," Chekov announced a moment later.

"Second assault shuttle still evading and maneuvering away, continuing on a more roundabout course toward the alien vessels."

"*What the hell are yeh doin', Kirk?*" Finnegan's voice suddenly shouted over the still open comm. channel. "*Release that shuttle right now!*"

"Mister Chekov?" Kirk either inquired or demanded impatiently—it was hard to tell which—gazing at the back of the navigator's head.

"Sorry, Keptin. I could only target vone of them to be sure I wouldn't miss both."

"Reel them in, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered. Then, to Finnegan, he said, "Colonel, as captain of the *Enterprise*, I order you to return immediately!"

"*I'm doin' me duty, Jimmy-boy! This is why we were assigned to yer ship in the first place! Now release me other team!*"

“Captain,” Spock called from his station where he was peering into his scope again, “the colonel’s shuttle is now back on a direct heading toward the alien vessels, advancing at standard assault velocity.”

“*Lieutenant Dickerson to bridge,*” the security chief called.

Kirk thumbed the button twice. “Kirk here.”

“*One of my officers was just found unconscious and stuffed into a Jefferies tube near the hangar deck. He’s been beaten up pretty badly, sir. We’re taking him to sickbay.*”

“Understood, Lieutenant.” Kirk slammed his fist down on the button again. “Kirk to transporter rooms one through four. Prepare to beam Colonel Finnegan and his troops off the assault shuttle now approaching the alien vessels.” He reopened the channel to the shuttle. “Mister Chekov, lock phasers on that shuttle and stand by to fire.”

Peter whirled around and stared at his uncle in shock.

“*I heard that, Kirk!*” Finnegan shouted. “*What the hell do yeh think yeh’re doin’?*”

“Reverse course and return to the hangar immediately, Finnegan!” Kirk demanded, practically spitting out the colonel’s name. “This is your last warning!”

“*I’ll have yer command for this, Kirk!*” Finnegan shouted.

“And I’ll have your head for assaulting my security officer!” Kirk countered. “Return to the *Enterprise*, Colonel! Now!”

“*Negative! We are proceeding with our mission!*”

Kirk thumbed the button once more. “Transporter rooms, energize. Mister Chekov, target engines and...”

“*Kyle to bridge. We can’t get a lock, sir.*”

“*This is Rand in transporter room two, sir. We can’t get a lock, either.*”

Kirk hesitated. Now what was he going to do? He certainly couldn’t order Chekov to fire on a shuttle full of Starfleet MACOs.

“Captain,” Spock called, “sensors are picking up one Klingon battlecruiser decloaking just inside the neutral zone. They are on an intercept course.”

“Belay that order, Mister Chekov. Stand down. On screen, Spock.”

On the viewscreen, a view of deep space replaced that of the alien vessels. Then, in its center, an area shaped roughly like a Klingon battlecruiser rippled, began to coalesce, and then solidified into the image of a *K’Tinga*-class battlecruiser.

“That’s...just...great,” Kirk muttered, wondering what the hell else could go wrong.

“Captain,” Spock straightened and looked over at Kirk, and when the captain looked back at him, he reported, “I have identified the vessel. It is the *Dark Destroyer*.”

Kirk turned his eyes back to the screen, seething. “Kargh.”

CHAPTER 7

“Red alert,” Kirk ordered. “Ensign Kirk, arm all weapons. Mister Chekov, bring that shuttle back aboard *fast*. Mister DeSalle, status of forward shields?”

“Up to fifty-three percent, Captain,” the helmsman reported. “Still increasing slowly, but steadily.”

“What about starboard and aft shields?”

“Starboard and aft at full strength, sir.”

“Stand by to come one-hundred eighty degrees about at a moment’s notice. Don’t wait for my order. If the Klingons fire on us before those shields are back to full strength...”

“Understood, sir.”

“Ensign Kirk?”

“All operational weapons armed and standing by, sir,” his nephew reported.

“Mister Chekov, lock photon torpedoes on their forward hull, just above their torpedo launcher, and along the length of the neck.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

“Lock phasers on both of their warp nacelle matter collectors,” Kirk added as Spock approached him. “And *make sure* they see you do it.”

“Aye, Keptin,” the navigator repeated.

Kirk turned his eyes to Spock as the Vulcan stopped beside his chair. “What is it now, Spock?” he asked.

“Captain, the Klingons have not attacked. Nor have they entered our space. May I ask why you are taking such openly aggressive action at this time?”

“You really need to ask me that?” Kirk inquired, finding it hard to believe that his Vulcan first officer—his longtime friend—couldn’t see the logic behind his actions.

“Revenge...” Spock began, but Kirk didn’t allow him to pursue that topic.

“We’re at war, Spock, regardless of what Starfleet Command calls it.” He looked ahead to the screen once more. “Defensive measures are clearly warranted.”

“Agreed. Measures such as raising our shields. However, locking our weapons...”

“You know very well what Kargh did to this ship the last time we met, Spock.”

“Indeed I do, Captain. However, as I pointed out earlier, past actions are not always a sure indication of present intentions. Captain Kargh has not attacked us, despite having had ample opportunity to do so.”

“Captain Kargh hasn’t attacked us *yet*,” Kirk clarified, “and I don’t intend to give him any more opportunities.”

“Perhaps he does not intend to attack at all,” Spock suggested. “For the *Enterprise* to initiate combat without first...”

“Captain Kargh is hailing us, sir,” Uhura reported, turning toward Kirk.

“On screen, Lieutenant,” Kirk ordered.

The image of the *Dark Destroyer* on the main screen waivered and was then replaced by that of the Klingon captain, Kargh, sitting proudly in his throne-like command chair.

“Kargh,” Kirk said, almost choking on the name as it past his lips.

"I see you have fixed your ship, Kirk," the bronze-skinned enemy commander said. "What a shame your Federation engineers could not improve its design in the process." His narrow gaze dropped for a moment, then rose once more. "I also see that you are preparing to attack my vessel. I did not come here to destroy you, Kirk, but I shall do so if you give me no other choice."

"What do you want, Kargh?"

"The last time we met, you begged me to listen to you rather than destroy your fleet's bloodworm-infested vessel. Are you prepared to listen to me this time, Kirk?"

"I'm listening now, aren't I?"

"Yes, you are listening...as your gunners lock your vessel's weapons onto mine."

"We're at war, Kargh, remember? What do you expect me to do? And even if we weren't, considering how our last meeting started out..."

"Keptin?"

"An unfortunate misunderstanding, Kirk. Nothing more than that or you would not be here to cry about it now."

"And all the other recent attacks on our ships by your forces—were those unfortunate misunderstandings as well?"

"I cannot speak for my peers, Kirk, but I am sure your forces must have provoked them in some way."

"How? By being in the same sector at the same time?"

"We patrol the neutral zone in defense of the Empire. We are not in the habit of invading alien space without reason."

"Really?" Kirk asked, genuinely astonished by that claim. "Since when?"

Kargh sighed. *"What do you want, Kirk?"*

"What do I want? You're the one who just got here, Kargh. I should be asking you that question. As a matter of fact, I *did* ask you that question." He thought for a second, then asked, "Why is it always you anyway?"

"Why is what always me?"

"With your people starting all this trouble and both of our governments increasing patrols along the neutral zone, why are you the only Klingon captain I ever see anymore? What happened to my old friends, Kor, Koloth, and Kang?"

Kargh drew a deep breath and sighed impatiently. *"Perhaps the dishonor of having failed to defeat you was too much for them to bear and they took their own lives,"* he answered, his tone thick with sarcasm.

"Or perhaps a more ambitious officer took care of that for them," Kirk suggested in return. "Perhaps that officer wanted the empire's newest battlecruiser for himself, and being warriors of far superior skill with much higher qualifications, they stood in his way." Kirk saw the anger burning in his opponent's dark eyes. He was getting to him. "How'd you do it, Kargh?" he asked. "Poison their food? Or did you hire an assassin?"

Kargh leaned forward in his chair, his jaw clenched, seething, practically snarling.

"Keptin... Colonel Finnegan..."

"You would accuse me of a coward's act, Kirk? If you are truly looking for another fight, I am more than willing to accommodate you."

"Keptin..."

“Not now, Chekov,” Kirk told the navigator quietly. “My apologies, Kargh. I forgot who I was talking to for a moment. I know better than to think you could have handled all three of them by yourself.”

“There are many things you do not know about me, Kirk, like the fact that my patience in the face of insults is extremely limited.”

“In that case, please forgive me, Kargh. I didn’t mean to hurt your tender feelings. I guess I just miss my old friends. Now *they* were some *real* warriors.”

Kargh leaned back in his chair once more, looking as though he’d had enough. “*Well, if you miss them that much, Kirk, then perhaps I can help.*” He turned his head and looked somewhere off-screen and barked, “*DaH!*”

“Keptin, Colonel Finnegan’s shuttle has opened fire on the alien wessels!” Chekov finally reported, refusing to hold his tongue any longer.

Spock peered into his scope again and added, “Captain, sensors are picking up three more Klingon vessels decloaking behind the *Dark Destroyer*. Readings indicate two D-seven battlecruisers and one bird-of-prey.”

“Mister DeSalle, expand the view. Put them all on screen. Uhura, get me Finnegan.”

On the screen, all three newly decloaking Klingon vessels appeared behind the *Dark Destroyer*. DeSalle’s eyes grew wide when he looked up at them and his jaw fell slack as he said, “My God!”

* * * * *

Strapped into his seat on the right side of the cockpit of Colonel Finnegan’s assault shuttle, the gunner fired the craft’s forward phasers at what appeared to be the alien vessel’s hangar bay doors until they began to glow, then added a few rockets to the mix as that glow grew brighter and brighter. Colonel Finnegan, fully outfitted in standard MACO combat gear, stood tall behind him and the pilot, his hands clutching the backs of their chairs, staring out through the canopy at those doors until they finally exploded under the shuttle’s assault.

“There they go, sir,” the gunner noted aloud.

“Enemy hangar bay open, Colonel,” the pilot added.

“*Kirk to Finnegan,*” the irate starship captain’s voice bellowed over the comm. “*Stand down immediately, Colonel! That’s an order!*”

“Take us in, Major,” Finnegan ordered, ignoring Kirk as he started walking aft toward the door that lead into the troop compartment.

“You got it, Colonel,” the pilot replied.

“*Finnegan!*”

Finnegan glanced back over his shoulder as he started through the door and shouted, “And close that damn channel!”

“Aye, sir,” the pilot replied as the door closed off the cockpit behind him.

He stepped into the crowded troop compartment where twenty-four MACOs outfitted in combat gear sat relaxing with their helmets off and their weapons in their laps. He cleared his throat and they all looked up at him. “Gear up, boys an’ girls,” he told them. “It’s time to go to work. And I remind yeh, this is all contain-and-detain—a capture mission, not a search-

and-destroy. Make sure they know yeh're in charge, but don' shoot unless yeh have to. Understood, MACOs?"

"Yes, sir!" they replied as one.

"*Prepare for contact,*" the pilot said over the intercom as he flew the shuttle into the no doubt heavily damaged alien hangar bay. Moments later Finnegan heard the shuttle make magnetic contact, its roof to the hangar bay's ceiling. "*Positive contact. Mag-locks holding.*"

"*Standing by on transporter controls,*" the gunner advised.

Finnegan and his troops broke into squads and took up their positions on the large rectangular mass transporter platform that dominated the deck between the rows of seats, half of them facing forward, the other half facing aft. Those in the fronts of their groups knelt, and all of them held their weapons at the ready.

"*I found you a couple of empty corridors, Colonel,*" the pilot informed him over the intercom, "*but scanners show the alien atmosphere to be borderline breathable. Better use your breathers.*"

"You heard the man, MACOs," Finnegan said. "Breathers on." He and his troops pulled their breathers into place over their mouths and noses. "Energize."

The transporter beam took them all as one.

Finnegan materialized in the center of an alien corridor, one of his squads with him. Looking off in both directions quickly—the lighting was dim and flat, but sufficient to see well enough—he saw no signs of aliens in the area. Nor did he hear anything, except for his own men and women breathing heavily behind him...which made him realize that he wasn't breathing himself. He didn't recall holding his breath intentionally, but he'd obviously done so. "Squad leaders, report," he ordered over the tac-comm. The replies came immediately, one right after the other.

"*First squad, all present.*"

"*Second Squad, all present.*"

"*Third squad, all present.*"

"Move out," he ordered. "Let's do this by the book, boys an' girls."

Elsewhere within the bowels of the alien vessel, Sergeant Shirem's squad made its way forward through an apparently rarely used dark corridor, weapons charged and ready. They soon approached a sharp bend that appeared to lead into an even darker area, and as the point man reached the corner, he knelt down and signaled for his squad mates to stop where they were. "*I hate blind corners,*" he mumbled over the tac-comm. Then he leaned forward and peeked around the corner, and saw no aliens he reported, "Looks clear, Sergeant."

"Proceed," Shirem ordered.

The point man rose back to his feet, peered out around the corner once more to be sure, then led his squad around the corner and slowly down the length of that darker side corridor toward an intersection with another one. Then, before he could do more than gasp, a helmeted and armored alien that had been hiding in the shadows of that next intersection jumped out from its hiding place into full view and shot him through the neck with some kind of rifle that fired a narrow but very intense bright purple beam.

“Contact!” someone managed to shout as the soldier collapsed dead to the deck and his comrades returned fire. Then several more aliens appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and that contact grew into an all-out firefight.

* * * * *

Captain’s Log, supplemental: The Enterprise has intercepted a pair of unfamiliar, badly damaged alien vessels that drifted into Federation space from inside the Klingon Neutral Zone—apparent victims of a Klingon attack. All attempts at communication have thus far failed and weapons fire has been exchanged. The Enterprise sustained only minimal damage in the engagement and the aliens’ weapon emitters have been destroyed. We were attempting to establish communications with them once more when Colonel Finnegan led his MACOs in a boarding action against them in violation of my direct orders as captain of the Enterprise. As if that weren’t trouble enough, the battlecruiser Dark Destroyer and three more Klingon vessels arrived on the scene a short time ago. So far they haven’t crossed into Federation space or opened fire on us, but I fear it’s only a matter of time...probably not very much of it.

“Status, Mister Chekov?”

“Assault Shuttle Two is back aboard, Keptin, but Colonel Finnegan’s has docked with vone of the alien wessels. His troops have already boarded.”

“Lieutenant Uhura, advise Lieutenant Dickerson I want security personnel to disarm the MACOs as they disembark and confine them to quarters under guard.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk pressed the comm. button on his chair. “Kirk to transporter room one, report.”

“*Still can’t get a lock, sir. Looks like some kind of signal transmission is interfering with the bio-scanners.*”

“Uhura, reopen the channel to Kargh, then track down Major Peterson and tell her to report to me here.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“All right, Kargh,” Kirk said to the Klingon captain in a somewhat less aggressive tone of voice. “I’m listening. What do you want?”

“*Not so anxious for a rematch after all, hey Kirk?*” the enemy captain remarked.

“I’ll go up against you one-on-one anytime, Kargh,” Kirk assured him, “but I’ll not put my crew, *or yours*, in unnecessary danger over a mere personal grudge.” McCoy stepped out onto the bridge just then and stopped short for a moment when he saw Kargh’s image on the screen. “Besides,” Kirk continued, “fighting a coward who calls for help at the first sign of trouble is a waste of my time.”

McCoy stared at Kirk with shock, then looked back up at Kargh, who looked to be seething with barely contained rage at the insult. “Uh oh,” he mumbled under his breath.

“*Give me the aliens, Kirk,*” Kargh demanded, gritting his teeth in anger.

“No,” Kirk replied, shaking his head, while McCoy walked around the back of the upper ring toward Ensign Kirk’s station.

“Why not?”

“Because you want them.”

“You test the limits of my patience, Kirk.”

McCoy stood at Peter’s station and gazed up at one of his overhead monitors to get a look at what they were facing. “Well isn’t this just dandy,” he remarked.

“Doctor?” Peter inquired.

“Looks like that uncle of yours is determined to put me to work in a hurry.”

“Why would he want to do that, sir?”

McCoy gazed down at the younger Kirk for a moment, then replied, “Never mind.” Then he looked first back up at the monitor and then around the bridge. “I swear to all the gods in Valhalla,” he said aloud, talking to himself, “sometimes I don’t know why I bother to come up here anymore.”

“The gods in where, sir?” Peter asked him.

McCoy threw his arms up in surrender and rolled his eyes as Peter grinned.

“At least tell me why you want the aliens, Kargh,” Kirk insisted.

“They have committed crimes against the empire.”

“I see,” Kirk replied. And then he added, “I like them already.”

DeSalle looked back over his shoulder at Kirk and gave him a funny look, but didn’t dare say a word.

“They invaded our space and attacked our vessels without provocation.”

“There’s irony for you,” McCoy remarked as he stepped down to Kirk’s side, while DeSalle and Chekov exchanged a look over Kirk’s previous remark—Chekov grinning while DeSalle only rolled his eyes.

“They did the same thing to us, Kargh,” Kirk told the Klingon captain, “and they’re in Federation space now.”

“And your combat troops are in the process of taking their ships as we speak. I want them, Kirk,” Kargh insisted. *“Do not make me go through you to get them.”*

Kirk’s expression changed from mocking to one of deadly seriousness. “I’m warning you, Kargh, if you so much as scratch the border with your bow, I’ll blow your ship right out from under you.”

McCoy threw Kirk a ‘what the hell’ look and then said, very quietly, “Jim, there’s only one of us and there are...”

“Not now, Bones.”

“Why risk the destruction of your vessel and the deaths of your crew for these aliens, Kirk? You do not know them. Their world is not a member of your Federation. You are not obligated to defend them.”

“How do you know?”

“Do not insult my intelligence, Kirk,” Kargh said, brushing the question aside. *“We know of all the worlds that make up your precious Federation and just how far your influence reaches. Their world lies far beyond your reach.”*

“Maybe so, but their presence in Federation space *now* obligates me to defend them nonetheless.”

“That is perhaps the weakest argument I have ever heard you make, Kirk. You appear to be growing...how would you say it? Slow-witted?”

"I'm not turning them over to you, Kargh, no matter how much you beg like a targ. If you try to take them by force, I'll blow you to dust."

"Have you gone blind as well as stupid, Kirk? You are one old starship. We are three Imperial battlecruisers."

"As I was just trying to point out to you, Captain, sir," McCoy stated with emphasis as Major Peterson stepped out of the turbolift behind them.

"And one bird-of-prey, Kargh," Kirk reminded his enemy, ignoring the doctor. "Let's not forget him just because he's a little more puny and insignificant than the rest of you."

"Very well, Kirk. If you insist on doing this the hard way..."

"Captain, the bird-of-prey is gone!" DeSalle reported, staring into his scope.

Spock stopped what he was doing and returned to his own scope and McCoy grabbed hold of the arm of Kirk's chair as Peterson, staring up at the viewscreen as she walked, reached Kirk's other side.

"Uhura, close channel. Mister DeSalle, status of the forward shields?"

"One hundred percent now, Captain," the helmsman reported positively.

"Enemy status confirmed, Captain," Spock reported. "The bird-of-prey has cloaked."

"Mister Chekov, target phasers on the vicinity *around* the alien vessels, but maintain torpedo lock on the *Dark Destroyer*."

"Aye, Keptin."

"Jim!" McCoy barked, refusing to be ignored. "What the hell are you doing?"

Kirk finally turned his eyes to the doctor. "Shouldn't you be taking care of Lieutenant Xon, Doctor?" he asked him. Then he looked up at Spock. "Spock?"

"Scanning the area around the alien vessels, Captain."

"Xon's a Vulcan, Jim," McCoy reminded his seemingly overstressed captain and old friend in response to his question. "Doctor M'Benga is better suited to..."

"Bones..." Kirk, started to protest.

"Damn it, Jim, there are three Klingon battlecruisers out there," the doctor all but shouted at him, "probably just waiting for an excuse to blow us all to Hades!"

"And?" Kirk prompted him, knowing that his bridge crew knew better than to allow themselves to be distracted by the two of them, especially during a crisis.

"And what the hell are you doing provoking them?" McCoy responded.

"What is it Scotty likes to say, Bones?" Kirk asked him, maintaining his calm. "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me?"

"But this is suicide, Jim! Kargh hurt us bad last time, and he was *alone*! He's got three more ships out there with him this time! We'll never..."

"Bird-of-prey decloaking and targeting alien vessels," Spock reported.

"Mister Chekov," Kirk called as though McCoy weren't even standing there anymore. "Target that ship and fire! All dedicated weapons!"

"Jim!" McCoy bellowed.

"Firing, Keptin!"

CHAPTER 8

Doctor McCoy clutched the arm of Kirk's chair in both hands as he leaned into Kirk and asked, as he watched the bird-of-prey's shields begin to glow under the assault of the *Enterprise's* phasers on the screen, "Jim, what in the blazes do you think you're doing?" The smaller vessel's shields suddenly collapsed as the phaser beams cut through and struck hard on the hull, inflicting heavy damage. "We can't take on the whole Klingon fleet!"

"It's not the whole Klingon fleet, Bones," Kirk clarified. "It's only Kargh and three other ships." At that moment, on the screen, the bird-of-prey exploded, momentarily bathing the bridge in blinding bright light that forced everyone to shield their eyes. "Make that *two* other ships."

"That's still three against one!" McCoy pointed out. "Might as well be their whole damn empire out there!"

"Mister DeSalle, what are the remaining Klingon vessels up to?" he asked.

"I don't understand it, Captain," the helmsman replied, gazing into his scope. "The battlecruisers' weapons are hot, sir, but they're holding fire for now and *still* not crossing into Federation space."

"Mister Chekov, hold our fire as well, but maintain ready."

"Aye, Keptin, but...I don't understand, either."

"That makes three of us, Lieutenant," McCoy chimed in.

Chekov turned and looked back at Kirk. "Ve destroyed vone of their ships, Keptin. Why do they not attack us?"

"A very good question, Mister Chekov," Kirk replied. "Certainly not normal Klingon behavior, is it?"

"Indeed it is not," Spock agreed, standing straight and looking at the viewscreen.

McCoy continued glaring at Kirk and added, "Seems to be a lot of that going around," his intended insinuation obvious.

"They're up to something," Kirk concluded, once more ignoring the doctor's remark.

"They're *always* up to something," McCoy pointed out.

"The question is...what?" Kirk added.

"Uh...you wanted to see me, sir?" Major Peterson asked, looking nervously at Kirk.

Kirk looked over at her as though she were an unwelcome intruder aboard his ship, then quickly checked that and told her, "Colonel Finnegan led an unauthorized assault on the alien vessels against my direct orders, Major. I'm relieving him of his command and giving it to you for the duration of your time on this ship, however long or short that might be."

"To me, sir?" she asked as though the idea were a preposterous one. "But...sir, I'm not a line officer or a..."

"We managed to pull one of your assault shuttles back in with a tractor beam," Kirk continued, ignoring her protest. "I've ordered all two dozen troopers disarmed and confined to quarters. From this point forward, once I've released them, I'm holding you *personally* responsible for their behavior. Do you understand me, Major?"

"Yes, sir, I do, but I'm not..."

“Good. Dismissed.”

Peterson swallowed hard—whatever she might have been about to say, she’d clearly thought better of it—then turned and walked away, heading back to the turbolift. Kirk turned his chair with her and watched to make sure she left the bridge.

“Kargh is hailing us again, Captain,” Uhura told him while he was facing her.

“Hailing us?” Kirk asked, hardly believing his ears. “After what we just did?”

“Yes, sir,” Uhura confirmed as her eyebrows climbed her forehead.

Kirk turned and faced forward again, knowing without needing to see, as he hadn’t heard the lift doors open, that Peterson had stopped on the upper deck and not left the bridge. He’d worry about that later. He needed to deal with the Klingons first. “They’re *definitely* up to something,” he said, giving voice to his thoughts. “On screen, Lieutenant.”

Once again, Kargh’s visage appeared on the main screen, and it looked angrier than ever. “*You have attacked and destroyed a vessel of the Imperial Klingon Empire, Kirk!*” he shouted, enraged. “*Without warning or provocation! You have committed an act of war!*”

“We’re *already* at war, remember?” Kirk countered. “And our attack was *not* without provocation! That vessel crossed into Federation space to engage in hostile action. *They* were the aggressors!”

“*Hostile action against non-Federation-aligned aliens who invaded our space and attacked our vessels before they escaped into your space! I demand you surrender your vessel at once, or I shall be forced to destroy you!*”

“I think we both know how likely that is to happen, Kargh,” Kirk said, “but you’re welcome to try. Do whatever you have to do.”

“*Have it your way, Kirk.*” Kargh’s image on the screen rippled and was then replaced once more by the head-on view of his menacing ship.

“He’s bluffing,” Kirk muttered.

“He’s closed the channel, sir,” Uhura reported, rather unnecessarily.

“Mister DeSalle?”

“Enemy weapons energy levels remain steady, Captain,” the helmsman reported, still confused if his expression was any indication. “The D-sevens are moving to pre-flanking positions, but so far they’re staying in the neutral zone. Wait a second, sir! *Dark Destroyer* is cloaking and moving off!”

“I just lost weapons lock, sir!” Chekov reported.

Kirk practically jumped to his feet and stepped forward behind and between DeSalle and Chekov. “Kargh would never run from a fight, even *without* the D-sevens backing him up. He’s trying to force us to fire into the neutral zone—trying to force a fight and make it look like we started it.”

“Isn’t starting a fight exactly what you *have* been trying to do, Captain, sir?” McCoy asked him sharply from behind.

Chekov looked up at Kirk. “But...we are already at war, sir, like you said. What would it matter, who fires first?”

“No Federation vessel has fired into the neutral zone yet, Lieutenant,” Kirk explained. “If Kargh can force us to do that, he can then claim that we’re escalating the conflict.”

“And by crossing into Federation space and attacking our vessels for the last five months, the Klingons have *not* been escalating it?” the navigator asked him.

“Exactly the question I’ve been asking the brass since the first attack, Lieutenant.”

DeSalle looked up at Kirk as well. “Kargh could be slipping in underneath us right now, sir,” he pointed out.

Kirk gnawed gently on his lower lip as he considered that possibility for a moment, then opined, “I don’t think so, Mister DeSalle. If they were going to attack, they’d have done so immediately and simultaneously. No, they’re definitely up to something else. I’ll bet you my command he doesn’t cross that border.”

Everyone looked at Kirk, if only for a moment.

“But...the aliens...” Chekov started to ask.

“Nothing more than a convenient tool, Lieutenant—a means to an end. Kargh doesn’t care about them one damn bit.”

“What makes you so sure about that, Jim?” McCoy asked him.

“My gut.”

“Captain,” Spock called, once more gazing into his scope. “The signal interfering with our transporter is coming from the *Dark Destroyer*.”

Kirk looked back at his first officer. “Are you sure about that, Spock?”

“Affirmative, sir. It weakened the instant he engaged his cloak.”

“Enough so that we can retrieve the colonel and his people?”

Spock stood up and faced his captain. “Negative, sir,” he answered, sounding almost disappointed. “He has already increased output to compensate.”

“Why would Kargh want to prevent us from retrieving our people?” Kirk wondered out loud.

“Insufficient information, sir. I could only...speculate. We do not even know for sure that transporter interference is the purpose of the signal. That might only be a residual effect.”

“We could try to track that signal and use it to target his ship again, sir, cloaked or not,” Chekov suggested.

“Do it, Lieutenant, but hold your fire,” Kirk told him, “regardless of which side of the border you find them on.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

“You’re taking an awfully big risk that Kargh’s not moving in for the kill, Jim,” McCoy pointed out.

Kirk turned back toward his chair and locked eyes with Major Peterson as he asked the doctor, “Your point, Bones?”

“What if you’re wrong, Jim?” McCoy asked him, jumping at the opening. “What if he *does* cross the border and attack us? There are more than four hundred other people aboard this ship who’ll pay for your mistake right along with you...possibly with their lives.”

Kirk continued staring at Peterson until she finally took the hint and left the bridge. Then, as he sat back down, he answered, “I called him a coward, Bones.”

“I know. I heard you.”

“You’re missing the point. I called him a coward in front of his entire bridge crew. I threatened to destroy his ship, and I *did* destroy one of the ships in his fleet. I insulted him in every way I could think of, and he didn’t do a thing about it.”

“I’ll remember to count that among my blessings the next time I thank the gods for all the miracles in my life,” McCoy told him, heavy on the sarcasm.

“It *is* a miracle, considering our last run-in,” Kirk pointed out, “and it tells me not only that whatever he’s after is extremely important to him, but also that he needs us alive for some reason. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have let me get away with saying *half* of what I did.”

“Wait a minute! Now I’m *really* confused,” McCoy said. “I thought you said he was trying to draw us into a fight.”

“I did, but I’m starting to think he might really be here for the aliens after all.”

“But...didn’t your gut just tell you...”

“Yes it did, Bones, but maybe it wasn’t right this time.”

“Well, at least I’ve lived long enough to hear you say that.”

“Lieutenant Uhura, apprise Starfleet of our current situation and status. Everyone else, keep your eyes open, just in case I’ve over-estimated Kargh’s restraint.

“I’m curious, Captain,” Spock said as he stepped down to join McCoy by his side. “For what reason do you suspect that Kargh might need us alive?”

Kirk thought it over for a moment, then replied, “I don’t know yet, Mister Spock.”

* * * * *

HoD Kargh sat rigidly in his chair, barely able to contain his rage...but containing it all the same. Kirk had insulted him at every opportunity, yet somehow he’d managed to hold back and not blow his garbage-scow *Enterprise* out of space...all for the greater good of the empire, of course. But by doing so, he’d risked looking weak in the eyes of his crew, and that was never a good thing.

“Signal boosted and steady, My Lord,” *Sogh* Klaar reported.

“You are certain its output is once more sufficient to prevent the Earthers from getting a transporter lock, even while we remain cloaked?” Kargh asked the *sogh*, his threat, though unspoken, clearly evident in his tone.

“I swear it,” Klaar assured him.

“Not as sufficient as destroying the *Enterprise* would be,” another of Kargh’s junior officers insisted, his tone challenging.

Kargh gritted his teeth. There it was—the first challenge to his authority. Likely the first of many if he didn’t put a stop to it. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, peering over at his first challenger out of the corner of his eye, turning his head only slightly. A young one, fairly new to the crew. One of those unchanged by the century-old augment virus. Tall and muscular, his cranial ridges like the back of a sea *treg*. Strong, but inexperienced. Kargh had seen potential in him. What a shame he had chosen to die so early in his service to the empire. “Repeat your statement, *Lagh*.”

The young officer approached Kargh defiantly. Kargh glared up at him while *Sogh* Klaar turned to watch. “I said...we should destroy the *Enterprise*.”

An opinion, not an overt challenge. “All in good time,” Kargh replied. Then, turning his eyes back to the forward screen, he ordered the officer, “Resume your station.”

“No.”

And there it was. Open defiance. An overt challenge to his authority as commander of the *Dark Destroyer*. Kargh drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then stood up and faced

the young officer. He really did not want to kill him. "I said..." He stepped right up into the fool's face, though he had to look up at him to meet his glare. "...resume your station."

"Kirk called you a coward and you did nothing," the *lagh* accused.

"Doctor Men'Gau'It, report to the bridge," Kargh heard Klaar say.

"He destroyed one of our vessels—a vessel operating under *your* authority—and *still* you did nothing," the *lagh* further accused.

"Are you questioning my orders?" Kargh asked him.

"No. I am challenging your fitness for command."

"*Pa'Tak!*" *La'Hom* Le'ak spat as she charged toward the *lagh*, angry, ready to defend her lord and husband's honor.

"*Meriyap!*" Kargh shouted, raising a hand to stop her. She stopped obediently. There was no avoiding it now. The *lagh* had given voice to his challenge—announced it for what it was for the entire bridge crew to hear. Still, the *last* thing Kargh wanted to do, particularly now, was start killing his own crew. "I give you one chance to withdraw your challenge and return to your post," he told the *lagh*.

"You are my commanding officer, *a Klingon warrior*, and you would allow me to withdraw?" the younger officer asked, appearing shocked. Then he said, "So, Kirk was right. You *are* a coward." Roaring suddenly with the blood-burning rage of battle, he grabbed Kargh by the front of his tunic and tried to lift the *HoD* up off of the deck, but Kargh broke his grasp quickly and jumped back into a defensive stance, grasping the thick handle of his *d'k tahg*—his warrior's dagger. He drew the blade as he stopped the *lagh's* charge with his empty hand and then plunged it hilt-deep into the *lagh's* heart, reducing his battle cry to little more than a mere grunt and whimper. Then he pulled it out again, allowing his challenger's blood to spill out onto the deck, and dragged it across his throat, opening his artery.

He grasped the doomed warrior's blood-soaked throat and stared into his dying eyes. "Challenge concluded," he declared. The *lagh* dropped to his knees, nearly dead, but Kargh held his disbelieving gaze. "You lose."

Kargh released him and he collapsed to the deck, and as he lay dying at Kargh's feet, Kargh sheathed his *d'k tahg* and accepted a rag that Le'ak handed to him and started wiping the blood from his hands.

Just then Doctor Men'Gau'It, a pure-blood like the *lagh*, arrived on the bridge. As he approached, Kargh, still glaring down at the dying officer and wiping his hands with the rag, ordered the balding doctor, "Get this *tor'zad* off of my bridge."

"Right away, *HoD*," Men'Gau'It replied. "Shall we flay his carcass and display it in the galley as a message to the rest of the crew?"

"Doctor," Kargh said, glaring at him, "this is not an appropriate time for you to offer one of your insightful critiques." He faced forward again, turning his back on Men'Gau'It as he continued wiping his hands on the rag, while Men'Gau'It knelt beside the casualty and checked him for signs of life. "Throw it out of the nearest airlock."

"It still clings to life, *HoD*, though barely," Men'Gau'It advised him.

"That will change when you comply with my order, Doctor," Kargh...informed him.

Men'Gau'It lifted the nearly dead young officer up off of the deck. "Of course, my high and mighty Lord *HoD*," he replied sarcastically. "Once more, I live to bow humbly to your warrior's whim while my skills as a surgeon waste away."

No one else, not even Le'ak, would ever have dared to speak to Kargh in that way, *especially* at that moment after what he had just done, but Doctor Men'Gau'It was a special case—a warrior doctor who had developed a very unique relationship with his commanding officer over a very long time.

Kargh discarded the rag and turned to address his crew as the doctor carried the foolish *lagh's* corpse off of the bridge. "Does anyone *else* think that Kirk was right?" he asked them. "Does anyone *else* wish to challenge my fitness for command? Speak *now* or not at all!" No one even so much as looked at him. "No one?" he asked, giving them all one more opportunity to speak up. Still, no one did. "Then from this point forward, any challenger who does not defeat me shall see his entire *house* pay for his mistake before I execute him!" Everyone bowed their heads slightly in deference. "Stations!"

Kargh returned to his chair and Le'ak stepped up to his side when he had settled. "Others *will* challenge you if you do not stop Kirk," she advised him, barely able to keep from fawning over him like some *be'teg* in heat, as though having watched him defeat his challenger and then stand firm before his crew had excited her. "Did you see the uncertainty in Klaar's eyes? For him, perhaps more than any other, it would be a matter of honor."

"For him, honor is a matter of perspective," Kargh pointed out. "Klaar is loyal."

"Yes," Le'ak agreed to a point, "but loyalty can crumble under the weight of honor's demands when measured against the questionable actions of one's own commanding officer. And where the honor of one's own house is concerned, honor's perspective tends to be fluid and unpredictable."

Kargh glared at his wife. "Do I perceive a threat veiled beneath your words, *La'Hom* Le'ak?" he asked her plainly.

She looked at him wide-eyed, as though the very thought were a poison in her mouth. "Never, My Lord," she assured him. "I only speak to remind you that others might not be as loyal *or* as honorable as Klaar appears to be."

"I assure you, if this were simply a matter of honor, the *Enterprise* and her annoying captain *both* would be long dead. You, more than anyone aside from myself, know why we cannot engage them directly right now."

Le'ak turned her eyes to the viewscreen. "Perhaps if we contacted K'Sia..."

"No!" Kargh barked. He glanced around the bridge, but no one had dared turn their eyes to him. Then he reined his emotions back in and turned to his wife once more. "K'Sia must never know that I have been chosen for this duty. I shall deal with the threat these aliens pose, and then I shall deal with Kirk."

CHAPTER 9

Though both sides had suffered losses, the aliens had quickly gained the upper hand and managed to pin down Sergeant Shirem and his squad in a cross corridor, and the firefight showed no signs of letting up anytime soon.

“Sergeant Shirem, report!” Colonel Finnegan demanded over the tac-comm.

The NCO backed off and took cover behind some bulky equipment around the corner behind them to reply while what remained of his squad continued to fight. “Meeting heavy resistance, Colonel,” he informed the C.O. “We are heavily outnumbered and...”

He broke off his report and raised his weapon and opened fire on another alien squad as it appeared behind his position, to his squad’s left flank. Seeing this, some of his troops joined in, redirecting their fire. They managed to put down that squad fairly quickly, as there was little cover for them to take advantage of, but then another appeared in their place. “...and outflanked!” he shouted, completing his report.

He rushed the newly arrived alien squad before they could maneuver into position and managed to beat a few of them down in hand-to-hand combat before they finally knocked him unconscious. Then, with alien defenders moving in from both ahead and to the left, the surviving MACOs were forced to surrender. The aliens surrounded them and took them away, carrying their dead and wounded along with them.

* * * * *

“Ten minutes,” Chekov muttered, glaring at the Klingon vessels on the viewscreen as Doctor McCoy walked back to Spock’s science station. “Ten minutes, and still they just sit there and do nothing.”

“Don’t worry, Pavel,” DeSalle told him, leaning toward him slightly. “We still don’t know where the *Dark Destroyer* is or what it’s up to. You might yet get a chance to shoot something.”

“Scanner stop working, Mister DeSalle?” Kirk asked the helmsman.

“No, sir,” DeSalle replied as he turned his attention back to his controls and peered into the device once more.

“Still no contact with the MACOs aboard the alien vessel, Captain,” Uhura reported as Scotty and Dickerson exited the turbolift and approached the engineering station.

Scotty stopped at engineering and faced Kirk while Dickerson continued to the next station over. “And there’s no way in hell we’re gonna lock onto ‘em with our transporters, either, sir,” he added.

“Nothing you can do to boost the gain any higher, Scotty?” Kirk asked the engineer, looking back at him.

“I’ve tried everythin’ I can think of, Captain,” he replied, “but that Klingon bastard’s interference signal is just too bloody strong.”

McCoy and Spock both watched as Kirk approached Scotty.

"Spock, I have to ask you," McCoy said, keeping his voice low. "Would you agree the captain's been acting uncharacteristically impatient and aggressive lately?"

"I would remind you, Doctor, that the captain nearly lost his ship and his entire crew to Captain Kargh during our last mission," Spock replied.

"I know, but that was nearly two months ago. I'm talking about just since we left Starbase Six."

"Since that time," Spock continued as though the doctor hadn't spoken, "he has had to watch his young nephew suffer the pain of having lost a loved one..."

"I realize that, but..."

"...has had a company-size group of security personnel removed from his crew and replaced with MACOs he doesn't want, essentially turning the *Enterprise* into a warship..."

"None of us wants..."

"...and has again been assigned to patrol the neutral zone sectors instead of being granted the exploration mission that he so desperately wanted and richly deserves."

"Damn it, Spock," McCoy barked, losing his patience, "would you please give me a chance to get a word or two in at some point!"

Kirk and Scotty stopped talking and looked over at them, as did most of the others. "Is there a problem, gentlemen?" the captain asked.

"No, sir," McCoy replied quickly, before Spock could say anything. "No problem Sorry." He waited for Kirk to resume his conversation with Scotty, then looked back at Spock and lowered his voice again. "Everything you just told me is exactly the problem, Spock. I'm afraid Jim might be starting to crack under all the pressure."

"Doctor, if you are preparing to declare the captain unfit for command..."

"No," McCoy adamantly declared, shaking his head and stopping Spock right there. Then he said, "I admit the thought has crossed my mind, but..." He shook his head again. "No, I'm not ready to go there. At least, not yet."

"Then what exactly is the point of this conversation?"

McCoy drew a deep breath and sighed. "I don't know," he admitted. "All I *do* know is that all this could end in terrible tragedy, Spock."

Spock raised an eyebrow and pointed out, "The same could have been said for any number of our previous missions, Doctor."

"Well, I guess I can't argue with that."

"Captain," Uhura called, "we're getting a fair translation of the alien language now."

"Enough to try talking to them again?" Kirk asked her.

"It's borderline, sir," she told him honestly, "but it may be worth a try."

"Hail them, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered as he started back toward the center seat. Then, by the time he sat down, she advised him...

"Channel open, sir. Audio only."

Kirk punched the call button on his armrest. "This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise* representing the United Federation of Planets to unidentified alien vessel. I wish to negotiate for an immediate cessation of hostilities between us. Please respond."

"*Starship Enterprise James T. Kirk Captain,*" a strange, raspy voice came back after a moment, "*To my vessel your soldiers did you send. My crew attack they did. Negotiations interest do not I.*"

“The assault was not authorized,” Kirk informed the apparent alien commander. “Our soldiers’ commanding officer acted against my orders and will be punished for doing so. I assure you, we do not want...”

“They’ve closed the channel, sir,” Uhura informed him.

Kirk sighed, disappointed. He’d hoped to start a real dialogue with the aliens and put a permanent end to the fighting. “See if you can improve the translator’s syntax, Lieutenant. Assuming we get them talking again, I don’t want a simple misunderstanding to make things any worse than they already are.”

“I will try, sir,” Uhura promised him, “but that’s probably the best the translator can do with such an unusual language.”

“We’ll see about that, Lieutenant,” Scotty told her, stepping up beside her.

“Damn you, Finnegan,” Kirk cursed the colonel under his breath.

* * * * *

“Step it up, MACOs!” Finnegan shouted to the troops behind him as he led his squad through the alien corridors from one victorious engagement to what he hoped would turn out to be another. “Shirem’s squad is pinned down and needs our help *now!*” He approached and started to round a blind corner into another corridor, and nearly ran right into one of the alien soldiers in masked helmet and body armor like those they’d just defeated. The alien raised its rifle high, preparing to crack Finnegan in the head with the butt...

The big lobster tail-headed Klingon warrior roared, raising his deadly, multi-bladed bat’leth high over Lieutenant Finnegan’s head as the young lieutenant started falling back. He swung it downward as Finnegan fell and the very tip of its outermost blade just caught him above his right eye, drawing blood and eliciting a scream at it carved a gash through the eye and down across the cheek.

...but Finnegan raised and crossed his arms and blocked the blow in the nick of time. The momentum, however, pushed his arms down into his face and knocked him onto his backside as the MACOs behind him fired their weapons, hitting the alien in the center of its torso and throwing it screaming to the deck. Then, suddenly, a new group of unarmed aliens jumped the squad from behind, subdued them by sheer force of numbers, and then tore their weapons away from them.

The battle digressed into hand-to-hand combat and the MACOs fought hard. Finnegan took several of the enemy out of the fight himself, but their numbers were simply too great. Then the enemy started using the MACOs own weapons against them, and they were forced to surrender. As the battle came to its end, they knocked Finnegan into semi-conscious and took him and what remained of his squad into custody.

Finnegan’s head hurt. He had nothing left in the tank and could only stare up at the ceiling as they dragged him by his feet through the corridor.

“He was lucky the blade only grazed him,” Lieutenant Finnegan heard someone say.

“Looks like a lot more than a graze to me,” someone else opined.

"Well, yeah it is, but it's not like it split his skull in half," the first voice replied. "I've seen that done, you know. I mean, he'll need a new eye, but we can clone one of those for him easily enough. Much deeper, though, and there would have been too much damage to the eye socket and probably the optic nerve. Possibly neurological damage as well."

"How long before he's fit to return to duty?"

"It'll take a few days to grow the eye. After the replacement we'll have to do some skin regeneration. I'd say somewhere from three to five days after the surgery."

"No," Finnegan said, his voice weak and oddly distant sounding to him. He opened his one remaining good eye and found a Starfleet doctor and a MACO major standing over him, side-by-side.

"What do you mean no?" the doctor asked him.

"Just replace the eye," he answered. "Leave the rest."

"Lieutenant..."

"Please, Major," Finnegan pleaded, interrupting his commanding officer, "just tell 'im to fix the eye, then get me the bloody hell out o' here."

"You'll be left with an ugly scar down the right side of your face if you skip the skin regeneration, Lieutenant," the doctor told him. "I'm sure you don't want that."

"Aye...I do," Finnegan told him. "It'll serve to remind me of a lesson well learned."

"No one's going to look at that scar and see it as a symbol, Lieutenant," the doctor argued. "Nor will it stand out as a badge of honor to anyone."

"I don' intend to wear it like one."

"Well then why the hell..."

"To remind me o' me carelessness."

"There are plenty of other ways you can remind yourself of that."

"Not for me, Doctor. Major Cage, please. Tell 'im. Make it an order if yeh have to. Just the eye."

"Are you sure about this, Sean?" the major asked him. "You don't have anything left to prove. Not to me."

"I do to meself, sir."

The major raised his eyes to the doctor and told him, "You heard the man, Doc. Just fix his eye."

"Thank you, sir."

* * * * *

*"I don't understand it, Keptin," Chekov said. "There are two of them and only vone of us. Three if you count that Cossack Kargh's *Dark Destroyer*, wherever that is...but they are just floating out there, doing nothing."*

"Patience, Lieutenant," Kirk said. "As long as they are just floating out there doing nothing, they're not shooting at us."

*"I think he *wants* them to shoot at us, Captain," DeSalle teased.*

*"At least they would be doing *something*," Chekov pointed out, making no attempt to deny to subtle truth not very well hidden in DeSalle's lighthearted accusation.*

Kirk looked over at Spock and asked him, “Any sign of the *Dark Destroyer*?” If there were, of course, Spock would have said something already.

“Negative, Captain,” the first officer replied evenly.

“Captain Kirk?” Lieutenant Dickerson called as Doctor McCoy stepped away from Spock and approached Uhura’s station. Then, when Kirk looked over at him, he said, “If we can’t beam the MACOs back, sir, I’m willing to take a squad of volunteers from my security force and shuttle over there to get them.”

“Admirable, Lieutenant,” Kirk told him, “but that would only escalate the situation.”

“And get you all killed in the process if the Klingons happen to decide they need a little moving target practice,” McCoy added.

Dickerson’s gaze fell to the deck. “I just wanted to...”

“I know, Lieutenant, and I understand,” Kirk told him as McCoy stepped down and took up his customary place at his side. “I want that, too, but assaulting the aliens again isn’t the answer. We’ll just have to figure out another way.”

McCoy punched the call button on Kirk’s chair, drawing the captain’s attention. Kirk gave him a look as Dickerson left the bridge. “What are you doing, Bones?”

“McCoy to Sickbay.”

Doctor M’Benga glanced over at the comm. monitor from the side of the diagnostic bed where he was busy treating Lieutenant Xon.

“*McCoy to Sickbay*,” the CMO’s voice repeated. “*Doctor M’Benga?*”

M’Benga sighed as he walked over to the table and pressed the button, then answered, “Doctor M’Benga here.”

“*How’s Lieutenant Xon doing, Doctor?*” McCoy asked him.

“I’ve finished closing the laceration on his scalp, but his concussion turned out to be a little more serious than I initially thought. I can release him to duty if I have to, if it’s vital, but I’d prefer to let him rest here for a while.”

“*Keep him there for now, Doctor,*” the captain directed. “*Let him rest. Bridge out.*”

“What was the point of that, Doctor?” Kirk asked, eyeballing McCoy.

“Just reminding you of the cost of acting too rashly, Jim,” McCoy replied. “Making sure you stand by what you just told Lieutenant Dickerson.”

Kirk drew a breath, intending to tell his old friend what he thought about his reminder, but Uhura suddenly interrupted. “Captain,” she called to him, having continued to monitor all channels as she watched Scotty work on the panel he’d pulled out of her console. “The aliens are hailing us, and they’re sending a visual signal this time, sir.”

“On screen, Lieutenant.”

The alien leader—at least, Kirk assumed it was their leader—appeared on the screen, looking as though it were hanging upside down from the ceiling of its bridge...or whatever served as its command center, and the only way Kirk could think to describe it was as the possible offspring of a Rottweiler and a large fruit bat. Though it’s shoulders and upper arms resembled those of a humanoid, its head looked more like that of a bat or short-snouted dog, and jointed wings of leather-like skin appeared to protrude from its back.

“This is Captain Kirk,” he said. “To whom do I have the honor of speaking?”

“*From Tzhal’Thahn Hegemony, home world Tzhalla, Kkrel’t’achk Commander I am,*” the alien replied. “*Kirk Captain, my soldiers many have you killed, but your soldiers all have we killed or captured. Failed has your assault.*”

Kirk glanced back over his shoulder—Uhura and Scotty were still hard at work—then looked to the screen once more and replied, “As I told you before, Commander, the assault on your vessel was not authorized. If you will release our soldiers to my custody, I promise you that I will personally see to it their commander is punished to the full extent of our laws.”

“*Assist we had hoped for. Allies against th’Linghan aggression we need.*”

Kirk latched onto that, a ray of hope suddenly shining in his mind. “Seems we have a common enemy, Commander,” he said. “The Klingon Empire is our enemy as well. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss an alliance with you, but I must insist that you return our soldiers to us first.”

“*Discuss alliance first, Kirk Captain,*” the alien countered. “*Return your soldiers all when agreement is reached and negotiations are concluded.*”

“Not exactly cooperative,” McCoy quietly observed, “but at least they’re talking to us now, Jim, instead of shooting at us.”

“And I need to do all I can to *keep* it that way,” Kirk replied just as quietly, pleased to hear the syntax finally starting to improve.

“Probably make surviving this whole ordeal a little easier.”

“Very well, Commander,” Kirk acquiesced, raising his voice again. “In the interests of forging a long-lasting peace between our peoples, let’s talk.”

CHAPTER 10

Aboard *Dark Destroyer*, Le'ak had been monitoring the Earth ship's communications. Rather, her immediate subordinate had been monitoring them, steadily and very closely, and had been reporting to her once every few moments.

"My Lord," she called to her husband. "KeeShar reports the Tzhal'Thahn are talking to Kirk of a peaceful alliance."

Kargh looked over at KeeShar directly. "*Sogh* KeeShar?"

"It does sound like they are negotiating such an alliance between them, My Lord," the young officer informed him.

"*QI'yaH Qu'vatlh* that weakling Earther Kirk!" Le'ak exclaimed.

"Why can he not simply kill an invading alien enemy, just one time?" Kargh asked of the universe, his tone much more controlled than his wife's had been.

Le'ak wandered over to her husband's side, eyeballing Klaar, who had not actually been glaring at Kargh, but who had turned his head partway to more easily and suspiciously listen in on his conversation. "Klaar watches you closely, My Lord," she quietly warned him.

"I am not blind, Le'ak," he replied as quietly.

"Then you know what you must do, my *loDnal*. You cannot allow yourself to appear weak in his eyes."

"I had hoped Kirk would destroy the Tzhal'Thahn," he reflected, "though I suppose I should have known better than to expect him to act with honor."

"I believe that is what Klaar is thinking as well...that you should have known better."

Kargh glared at his wife with suspicion. "Why do you try so hard to convince me that treachery dwell's in Klaar's heart?" he asked her. "Do you wish him dead for some reason too personal to discuss? Do the two of you share a dangerous secret, perhaps?"

"No, My Lord, of course not," she replied with fear in her eyes. "I simply wish for you to be aware."

"So you believe that I am unaware of what goes on aboard my own vessel."

"No, My Lord, I am not saying that."

"Perhaps you should not say anything," he suggested...sternly, his implied warning only thinly veiled at best. "Station." As Le'ak obediently returned to her station, Kargh glared at Klaar, whom he'd caught glancing back at him at that same moment. "You have something to say, Klaar?" he asked him.

"I wish only to ask your orders...*HoD*," the younger officer replied.

"My orders to you are to tend to your station and keep your mouth shut."

"Yes, My Lord," Klaar submitted, turning back to his station.

Kargh looked over at Le'ak, who returned his look with one of total submission—he could tell that she nonetheless had something more to say to him—and then stood and walked over to her.

"If I may, My Lord?" she inquired, not waiting for him to speak first.

"You may, my *be'nal*, but guard your words," he told her, granting her permission to speak her mind, but warning her to do so wisely.

“You cannot allow the Tzhal’Thahn to share what they know with the Earthers. If you do not act decisively, and soon, someone else shall challenge you.”

Kargh looked her in the eye and replied, “Then someone else shall die.” With that, he returned to his chair and commanded, “KeeShar, monitor their negotiations closely.”

“Yes, My Lord.”

“If they do make peace, you shall tell me immediately.”

“Understood, My Lord.”

Kargh thought the situation over and concluded, “We may yet be forced to destroy the *Enterprise*.”

Klaar locked his station, then stood and faced his commander. Kargh kept his seat but rested his hand on his *d’k tahg*, just in case.

“My Lord.”

“You rise with your back to your station and speak, Klaar,” Kargh observed aloud, “after I told you to tend to it and to keep your mouth shut?”

“I seek clarification, My Lord.”

“Clarification of what?”

“You recently advised this crew that you stand against the new imperial plan. You then challenged us to stand by your side or to mutiny as we saw fit.”

“And?”

“Most of us chose to stand with you. Those who did not are dead.”

“Do you have a point to make, *Sogh* Klaar, or do you simply wish to join the second group?”

“If you truly stand against the plan, then why do you wish to prevent the Tzhal’Thahn from telling the Earthers what they know?”

Kargh stood up, glaring at Klaar, and stepped up to him, nearly nose-to-nose. “I *do* stand against the plan, Klaar, but that does not mean that I shall commit treason against the empire by allowing the Earthers to learn of it, for if they did, they would be forced to strike before we have prepared. Does that clarify the issue to your satisfaction?”

“It does, My Lord.”

“Good. Now resume your station before I decide that you have been derelict in your duties by abandoning it.” Klaar returned to his seat and unlocked his station quickly under Kargh’s critical stare. “And do not disobey my orders again.”

* * * * *

“Then if not from that zone that I have described to you, where *do* you come from?” Kirk asked the alien commander.

“Our Hegemony lies beyond what your people would consider to be the far side of the th’Linghan Empire, so while we are a peaceful people at hearts, we have known invasion and war at their hands many times. Having the th’Linghans as celestial neighbors has taught us, necessarily, to be strong and to strike first when threatened is perceived.”

Ensign Kirk turned to his uncle, who looked sidelong at him briefly, and advised him, “Everything...standing by, sir.”

Kirk nodded slightly, but continued talking with the alien. “And that’s how you came to be here?” Kirk then asked the alien. “You were carrying out a preemptive strike against the Klingons and...”

“No. No preemptive strike. Our listeners along the border determined the th’Linghans were developing plans to expand their empire by force of arms. My kre’til was assigned to enter th’Linghan space...to gather additional intelligence. A th’Linghan patrol detected our presence and attacked. Our navigation computer was destroyed. Then, full power space-bend engine surge. We had to engage, direction random. More combat crossing th’Linghan space. Then we are here.”

“And on behalf of the United Federation of Planets, we welcome you in peace,” Kirk interjected.

“Not all eager to welcome us in peace, Kirk Captain. Soldiers do not welcome us.”

“Our soldiers acted against orders, as I’ve already explained,” Kirk reminded the alien commander once more.

“Not so, the th’Linghans,” the alien replied. *“They attack as one force, united. They will destroy us on seeing us if we depart your Federation space.”*

“Then don’t depart. At least...not yet.”

“You have proposal?”

“I do,” Kirk replied, confident that the Federation Council would go along with his plan. “In exchange for the immediate return of all our soldiers, both the living and the dead, I will petition my government to offer you and your people sanctuary until such time as you have repaired your vessels and determined a way to return home safely.”

“Allow me a moment to discuss with my officers, Kirk Captain.”

“Certainly, Commander. Take all the time you need.” He made a cutting gesture with his hand toward Uhura.

“Audio offline, sir,” she then advised him.

He looked over at his nephew and told him to, “Disarm the torpedoes, Ensign.”

“Sir?” Ensign Kirk questioned.

“You heard me, Ensign,” Kirk told him, mildly annoyed. “Maintain phasers on stand-by, but stand down and disarm the torpedoes.”

“But, Captain...”

“Jim!” McCoy exclaimed, adding his protest to the ensign’s. “We don’t know...”

“Now, Ensign Kirk!” Kirk insisted.

“Aye, sir,” his nephew finally acquiesced, swallowing hard and blushing as he turned back to his console.

“Jim, what the hell are you doing?”

“As you were, Doctor.”

Spock stepped over to the railing near his station. “Captain, I’m forced to agree with Ensign Kirk and Doctor McCoy,” he said. “While the alien commander does *appear* to want to avoid further conflict with us, we cannot know for certain that he...”

“I want them to see that when I say peace, I *mean* peace, Spock,” Kirk advised him.

“Very well, sir. Then, may I remind you that the Klingons...”

“If the Klingons were planning to attack, they would have done so by now,” Kirk told him, though that was only supposition, of course, and Spock would recognize it as such.

“May I also remind you, sir, that we do not know where the *Dark Destroyer* has gone. If Captain Kargh...”

“Alien commander back online,” Uhura advised them all.

“Audio on,” Kirk ordered.

“*We find your proposal acceptable, Kirk Captain,*” the alien commander informed Kirk, filling him with a sense of relief over another conflict ultimately avoided, “*but we have already rendered your soldiers’ vessel inoperable.*”

“With your approval, Commander, I’ll send my people over in unarmed shuttlecrafts to retrieve our soldiers and tow their vessel back to my ship.”

“*I approve,*” the alien replied immediately. “*May our two peoples always know peace between them.*”

The alien’s image faded and the pair of Klingon D-7 battlecruisers reappeared on the screen. Kirk stood up and walked over to the railing where Spock was still standing. “Two shuttlecrafts, Mister Spock,” he directed. “You pilot one and Lieutenant Dickerson pilots the other. Full medical rescue teams.”

“Security, sir?” Spock inquired.

Kirk thought it over for a few moments, then replied, “Minimal. One team of two per shuttlecraft. Put them in medical blue. Dickerson, as well. Type-one phasers only, and keep them out of sight.”

“Very well, sir.”

“Get down to sickbay, Bones,” Kirk said, turning his attention to the doctor as Spock headed for the turbolift. “Don’t risk his health, but I want Lieutenant Xon back up here if it won’t do him any harm and he feels up to it.” McCoy nodded and followed Spock into the lift, and Kirk crossed to the railing by the engineering station. “Mister Scott, get back down to Engineering. If the Klingons decide it’s time to fight, I want you down there to hold things together personally.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty replied, starting toward the lift as Kirk turned forward and walked back to his chair.

“I believe the captain handled the situation quite logically, Doctor,” Spock had said as soon as the lift doors had closed behind the two of them. “It appears your concerns about his emotional state were unfounded.”

“I sincerely hope you’re right, Spock,” McCoy replied. “Still...I don’t like how he was talking to Kargh before. It was like he was going out of his way to intentionally insult him.”

“He spoke to Kargh in candid terms that he knew Kargh would clearly understand. What specifically was your concern?”

“It looked to me like he was trying to goad Kargh into shooting at us so he’d have an excuse to shoot back.”

“Doctor McCoy,” Spock said, speaking in that tone of voice that always preceded his more straightforward and blunt accusations. “Are you implying that the captain was acting out of a desire for revenge?”

McCoy met the Vulcan’s accusatory gaze, ready to snap back at him, but the truth was that he wasn’t entirely wrong. “I’m saying it’s *possible* that he was,” he admitted.

“I seem to recall an instance a few years ago when you insisted the captain was not capable of acting in such a manner,” Spock reminded him. “I believe your exact words...”

“I know what I said, Spock,” McCoy told him, interrupting, “but that was different. Jim’s career was on the line and we all knew he wasn’t guilty.”

“Doctor McCoy...” There was that tone again. “...are you now telling me that you lied under oath at the captain’s court martial?”

“Of course not!” McCoy exclaimed. Then he reined himself back in and clarified, “I mean...well...not exactly.”

“I see. Then would it be accurate to say that...”

“Sickbay!” McCoy told the computer.

“Hangar deck,” Spock added.

The lift finally started to descend.

* * * * *

“Translation of negotiations confirmed, My Lord,” *Sogh KeeShar* reported to Kargh. “The Tzhal’Thahn have made peace with the Earthers.”

“Then we no longer have a choice,” Kargh concluded. “Open a conference channel to *HoD Kang* and *La’ Kor*. Put them both onscreen.”

Seconds later, Kargh’s fellow warship commanders both appeared on the main screen, its video split to accommodate them, Kang on the left and Kor on the right. “You have both heard the translation?” he asked them.

“Yes,” the other commanders replied simultaneously.

“*I cannot say that I am surprised by this turn of events,*” Kang added. “*Kirk possesses a gift for turning his enemies into allies.*”

“*As you both know from your first-hand experiences in cooperating with him,*” Kor pointed out.

“*We fight for our own purposes, Kor!*” Kang spat. “*Not at the whim of alien entities for their benefit!*”

“*You had Kirk in your grasp, Kang,*” Kor countered, “*and you allowed him to slip through your fingers! You could have destroyed the Enterprise!*”

“*The same could be said for you, La’.*”

"I had no choice in the matter!" Kor insisted angrily. "The Organians forced a cease-fire on both of our fleets! You and your warriors were aboard the Enterprise itself, Kang! You should have destroyed it while you had the chance!"

"They argue like children over targ meat," Le'ak whispered into Kargh's ear.

"Enough of this!" Kargh shouted at the both of them, ending their squabbling, at least for the moment. "Kang did what he had to do, just as we all have done, and you forget your place, La' Kor."

"Exactly the point of view I would expect one who has also collaborated with Kirk to have," Kor responded.

"At least I recognized him when I saw him, Kor," Kargh replied. "No one had to tell me who he was."

"How could I have known, Kargh?" Kor asked him. *"I was..."*

"That is 'HoD Kargh' to you, La' Kor, or 'My Lord.' Forget your place again and you shall not return home from this mission."

"You have not even told us what this mission is, HoD Kargh, and you forget your place as well. I am Da'Har. You would do well to remember that."

"Argument over stations and associations is pointless," Kang pointed out. *"But Kor does have a point, Kargh. You have told us nothing of this mission."*

"Because until now the mission has been fluid," Kargh explained.

"Until now?" Kor asked. *"Then it is apparently fluid no longer, so please...HoD... enlighten us."*

"The Tzhal'Thahn spies know of the imperial plan to expand," Kargh told them. "We must prevent them from sharing their knowledge with the Earthers."

"Which they might already have done while we floated here like quivering cowards afraid to fight!" Kor pointed out accusatorily.

"Exactly," Kargh agreed.

"Then why have we not crossed the border and attacked?" the commander asked, his tone demanding an answer.

"Indeed," Kang agreed. *"What are we going to do about it, Kargh?"*

"What do you think we are going to do about it?"

* * * * *

"We'll need to protect the shuttlecrafts from the Klingons if they make a move," Kirk said, stating to obvious more to himself than to anyone else in particular. He glanced over to his nephew and said, "Ensign Kirk, rearm the torpedoes," and then addressed the navigator, saying, "Mister Chekov, bring all weapons to bear on the D-sevens, but don't forget the *Dark Destroyer* is still out there somewhere. Be ready to alter target and hit her hard, wherever and whenever she might show herself, but wait for my order." Yes, Pavel Chekov was a navigator and a damn good one, but he was also one of the best weapons officers in the fleet.

"Aye, Keptin," the navigator/weapons officer replied. "They vill never know vhat hit them."

“On my order, Lieutenant,” Kirk reminded him. “Mister DeSalle, whatever happens, keep us between the Klingon vessels and our shuttlecrafts.”

DeSalle looked back at the captain and asked, “All three Klingon vessels, sir?” and explained, “That may prove to be a little difficult when they start maneuvering, sir, especially since one of them is still cloaked.”

“Just do the best you can, DeSalle,” Kirk told him. “That’s all I’m asking.”

“Aye aye, sir,” DeSalle acknowledged as he faced forward again.

“Spock to bridge.”

Kirk thumbed the button on his armrest. “Kirk here.”

“We are ready to launch, sir.”

“You’re clear to proceed, Mister Spock. Watch your backs out there.”

“We will, Captain. I trust you will as well.”

“You bet your life we will.”

“My point exactly, Captain. Spock out.”

DeSalle looked over at Chekov and asked, “Did he just make a joke? Our *Vulcan* first officer?” Before Chekov could reply, the indicator light drew DeSalle’s attention back to his board when it started flashing and he reported, “Hanger bay doors are opening, sir.” Then he took a look back into his scope and shouted, “Captain, the Klingons are powering up their weapons and crossing the neutral zone border!”

“Raise shields,” Kirk ordered immediately as he watched the twin D-7 battlecruisers on the screen open fire. “Spock, stand down! Do *not* launch!”

The *Enterprise* rumbled and shook as the enemy disruptors peppered her shields, their nose-mounted torpedo launchers glowing a dim red as they ‘warmed up.’

CHAPTER 11

“Return fire,” Kirk ordered, “all weapons!”

“Firing!” Chekov confirmed as he locked onto targets and fired multiple weapons at virtually the same moment.

The view on the screen showed one D-7 being hit by one of two bright blue phaser beams while the other battlecruiser took an *Enterprise* torpedo amidships. The first managed to roll away from the streaming phaser beams and return fire with its disruptors, but the second failed to maneuver as quickly and took a second torpedo at the base of its boom neck.

Enterprise shivered under a direct hit and DeSalle reported, “Forward shields down to seventy-three percent!” as Xon walked onto the bridge and headed to the science station.

“Keep us between the Klingons and the aliens, Mister DeSalle,” Kirk ordered.

“One of them is trying to outflank us, sir!” DeSalle informed him.

“Mister Chekov, discourage them!”

“Aye, Keptin!” He fired phasers on the flanking Klingon vessel and torpedoes on the one that lay dead ahead, both of which fired back at the *Enterprise* at the same time.

* * * * *

“Our wings have engaged the *Enterprise*, My Lord,” Klaar reported. “Moving to flank and crossfire positions.”

“Arm disruptors and torpedoes,” Kargh commanded. “Prepare to disengage cloak and destroy the Tzhal’Thahn vessels.”

“*QaPla’!*” Klaar shouted with enthusiasm.

“*QaPla’!*” the rest of the bridge crew returned.

“Weapons standing by, My Lord,” Klaar reported.

“*DaH!*”

* * * * *

“*Dark Destroyer* is decloaking to aft, Captain,” Xon reported. “They are preparing to fire on the Tzhal’Thahn vessels.”

“Mister Chekov, target Kargh’s ship and fire, fast! Full spread!” Kirk ordered with urgency. “Mister DeSalle...”

“Moving to intercept, sir!” DeSalle reported as he maneuvered the *Enterprise* toward the space between the *Dark Destroyer* and the Tzhal’Thahn ships, having anticipated Kirk’s command, while Chekov fired on *Dark Destroyer*’s shields with aft phasers and torpedoes.

* * * * *

“Weapons locked,” Klaar reported as their vessel shook under *Enterprise*’s barrage.

“Destroy them!” Kargh demanded.

Klaar reached, but before he could press the fire controls he and his crewmates were thrown violently from their stations. Consoles erupted into showers of sparks and flames and the bridge quickly filled with acrid smoke.

“What happened?” Kargh demanded to know as he picked himself up off of the deck.

“*Klingon battlecruiser targeting alien vessels on the Federation side of the border,*” a hail came in over a clear, open channel just as Kargh caught a glimpse of one of the new three-nacelled Starfleet dreadnoughts soaring past on the forward screen. “*This is Captain Joshua Reynolds of the Federation dreadnought U-S-S Federation. Cease fire immediately and power down your weapons or be destroyed. This is your only warning.*”

“Destroy the Tzhal’Thahn quickly, Klaar!” Kargh shouted. “Then turn all weapons on the dreadnought!”

“All weapons are offline, My Lord!” Klaar replied, his fingers dancing over his board in search of some way to bring them back online. Having failed that, he turned and faced his commander. “But we can still die gloriously in battle, *HoD!*” he proclaimed. “We can ram the Tzhal’Thahn vessels!”

Le’ak glared at Klaar, shocked by his suggestion as she rushed to Kargh’s side. “You *know* we cannot, My Lord,” she insisted, speaking as quietly as she could while ensuring that her husband would hear her over the cacophony of battle. “We *must* survive this for the honor of the empire!”

“Yes, I know,” Kargh acknowledged. “Our glorious deaths in battle shall have to wait for another day.” He turned to Klaar. “Klaar, can we still cloak and maneuver?”

“Yes, My Lord, but...”

“Engage cloak. Take us back into the neutral zone.”

Klaar leapt to his feet and glared wide-eyed with surprise at Kargh. “My Lord!” he exclaimed. “You would abandon Kang and...and Kor! For me to run when my...”

“*Now, Klaar!*” Kargh shouted, grasping the handle of his *d’k tahg*.

“Understood, My Lord!” Klaar angrily submitted, returning to his seat.

* * * * *

On the large main screen aboard the dreadnought *Federation*, the *K’Tinga*-class *Dark Destroyer* veered away from the alien vessels and vanished.

“Enemy vessel changing course and cloaking, sir,” the weapons officer reported.

“Hold your fire,” Captain Reynolds ordered. “They’re probably withdrawing across the neutral zone. Track their energy signature to be sure.”

“Track... But, sir, the *Enterprise* is in serious trouble! She needs our help!”

“Not for long, she’s not.”

* * * * *

“Another vessel has joined the battle and intercepted the *Dark Destroyer*,” Lieutenant Xon reported. “Dreadnought, *U-S-S Federation*, N-C-C two-one-zero-zero.”

“DeSalle, Chekov, belay that,” Kirk commanded with renewed gusto. “Concentrate all efforts on the D-sevens.”

“Aye, sir,” both men replied at the same time.

“Shields down to thirty-eight percent, sir!” DeSalle reported anxiously, just to remind his captain that they were still in trouble.

“*Scott to bridge!*” the chief engineer hollered anxiously over the intercom. “*She’s shakin’ apart down here! She canno’ take much more o’ this, captain!*”

“Hold her together just a little longer, Scotty,” Kirk insisted, knowing that he’d find a way to do just that. Scotty was something of a miracle worker. He always found a way. “The cavalry just arrived. It’s almost over.”

“*Captain Kirk, the matter/anti-matter...*”

The *Enterprise* rocked and rumbled. On the screen, the D-7s bore down on them, exchanging another salvo. Then, suddenly, both enemy vessels reeled as they took incoming heavy phaser and torpedo fire from a second dreadnought that soared between them as they peeled off.

“*Klingon battlecruisers*,” came her captain’s voice over an open channel, bringing a smile to Kirk’s face, “*this is the Federation dreadnought Alliance. Withdraw immediately.*” Kirk watched with relief as the *Alliance* took station between the *Enterprise* and both D-7s, protecting her battered sister ship. “*Cease all hostile action or be destroyed.*”

The D-7s fired on the *Alliance*, but its shields held. *Alliance* returned fire with both phasers and torpedoes, burning a hole through one of the D-7’s wings and then blowing off that warp nacelle with a torpedo. And then the destroyer *U.S.S. Saladin* arrived, firing on the other D-7, which took heavy damage from both the destroyer and the explosion of its brother battlecruiser’s severed nacelle.

Both D-7s finally withdrew and limped back across the neutral zone border.

“Sir, the captain of the *Saladin* is hailing us,” Uhura reported, her own sense of relief clearly evident in her voice.

“On screen, Lieutenant,” Kirk said. Then, when Captain Ray Martin’s smiling image appeared on the screen, he said, “Thanks for the assist, Ray.”

“Anytime, Jim,” Martin replied. “*I’ll pass that on to the others as well.*”

“Thank you. I’m curious, though, as to how you and those dreadnoughts got here so fast. The fight had barely just started.”

“*We were already on our way*,” Martin told him. “*Admiral Nogura sent us in as soon as he received your last update. Said something about the Enterprise having taken enough beatings lately.*”

“Is that right?” Kirk asked him, gazing over at Spock, who’d just stepped onto the bridge and was simply looking at him from Xon’s side with one eyebrow raised.

“*He also mumbled something about a possible refit in her future. Looks like you might be getting yourself a shiny new lady soon.*”

“I’m perfectly happy with her the way she is, Ray,” Kirk assured his friend as Scotty walked onto the bridge and approached him.

“*I don’t blame you one bit, Jim*,” Martin replied.

“So where are you and the rest of the cavalry off to now?”

“Sensors show the Klingons are still hanging around just across the neutral zone border, so we’re going to do the same for a while. After that, Saladin will be temporarily assigned to K-Seven.”

“I see. I’ve still got some business to take care of right now, Ray, but maybe the four of us can get together later.”

“I look forward to it, Jim. Saladin out.”

Kirk saw Spock approaching him out of the corner of his eye, but turned to Scotty as the exterior view returned to the screen. “Mister Scott?”

“We’re in pretty good shape now, Captain, all things considered,” the chief engineer told him. “I would like a wee bit o’ time to run diagnostics on all systems though, if yeh can give it to me.”

“We won’t be going anywhere for a while yet, Scotty. Run your diagnostics.”

“Thank yeh, sir.”

“Lieutenant Uhura, hail the alien commander,” Kirk requested as Scotty stepped up to the engineering station to get to work.

“Aye, sir.”

“What is it, Spock?” Kirk asked his first officer, who’d stepped down to his side and waited patiently for his turn.

“I do not wish to accuse Captain Martin of providing you with false information, Captain. However, I must point out that if Admiral Nogura had dispatched those three vessels upon receiving your last update, as Captain Martin just stated, then none of them would yet have arrived in this sector.”

“I was just thinking the same thing, Spock,” Kirk told him. “Someone had to have gotten word to the admiral before that, which means that someone aboard is working directly for him.”

“That is one possibility,” Spock agreed.

“If you can think of alternative explanation, Mister Spock, I’m all ears.”

“There are always alternatives, Captain,” Spock pointed out. “However, I am forced to admit that without additional information, I cannot offer you one at this time.”

“Someone in my crew might not be exactly who they seem to be, Mister Spock,” Kirk concluded.

“That is not necessarily the case, Captain,” Spock disagreed. “If someone onboard is, in fact, secretly working for the admiral, that person may be one of the MACOs,” he then pointed out, offering up one of his alternatives.

Just then the alien commander’s image appeared on the screen once more, drawing all of Kirk’s attention. He’d have to worry about identifying Nogura’s spy later. *“Kirk Captain, please give my thanks to your vessel commanders for coming to our aid.”*

“I’ll be sure to do that, Commander,” Kirk assured him...or her...whichever it might have been. “May I assume you’re still prepared to return our soldiers to us?”

“Affirmative.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Commander. We’ll be launching two shuttlecrafts shortly.” He nodded to Spock, who half-nodded back and then left the bridge. “In the meantime, I would be honored if you’d accompany my people back here so that we can meet face-to-face.”

“My thanks to you, Kirk Captain, but my people need me here. However, if you would arrange for me to meet with your government’s leaders, there is a matter I must discuss with them—something I assure you they will want to know about.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Stand by to receive our shuttlecrafts. Kirk out.”

Later, Kirk and Scotty watched from the observation deck as their two shuttlecrafts approached the *Enterprise* and entered the hangar bay, the one in back outfitted with a small tractor beam attachment, towing the wreckage of the MACO assault shuttle behind it.

“Ach,” Scotty droned when he got a good look at the wreckage, sounding like a cat choking on a hairball. “Looks like our new friends made a real mess o’ that assault shuttle.”

“Think it’s worth salvaging?” Kirk asked him.

“I’ll need to take a closer look to be sure, but...it doesn’t look like it from here.”

“Come on. Let’s go down there.”

As they made their way down to the hangar deck together, Kirk started getting a good angry on as he anticipated seeing Finnegan again. “You two, with me,” he said to the pair of security ensigns posted just inside the door that led out into the bay, armed with phaser-IIs, as he and Scotty passed between them.

“What are yeh gonna do to him, sir, if I may ask?” Scotty inquired as they approached the nearer of the two *Enterprise* shuttlecrafts, both of which had already touched down and were powering down their systems. He knew he didn’t need to specify who he was referring to by ‘him.’

“Tar and feathers are looking pretty good right now,” Kirk replied.

“Aye.”

Kirk stopped, Scotty and the ensigns along with him a step later, and stood waiting while Finnegan approached him from that nearer shuttlecraft. Scotty moved off to the side and waved to a couple of nearby engineers in red coveralls who didn’t appear to be too busy at the moment. “You lads, come with me,” he told them. Then he led them off toward the damaged assault shuttle as medical teams started arriving to tend to the wounded MACOs. A few more *Enterprise* security personnel arrived as well and stood by.

If Kirk was angry, Finnegan was filled with rage as he approached. “I wanna talk to yeh, Kirk,” he bellowed, “right now!”

With no warning at all, Kirk hauled off and belted Finnegan across the mouth as hard as he could, knocking him on his ass. “*That’s* for assaulting my security officer!” he shouted at the MACO commander, surprising those MACOs who had walked up behind their C.O., who looked around at one another, not knowing what to do. Then he said, “And this is for disobeying my direct orders! Colonel Sean Gavin Finnegan, you are under arrest!” He turned his eyes to one of the security ensigns at his side, then glimpsed a junior lieutenant among the others. “See to it that he receives whatever medical treatment he might need, Lieutenant,” he ordered the young woman, “then throw him in the brig.”

“Aye, sir,” the lieutenant acknowledged.

“With pleasure, sir,” one of the others added.

Lieutenant Dickerson and Commander Spock approached Kirk as two of the security officers grabbed Finnegan by his arms and lifted him up off of the deck.

“Mister Dickerson, you and your people escort the MACOs to Sickbay,” Kirk told the security chief. “I want every one of them thoroughly checked out. If Doctor McCoy doesn’t keep them in Sickbay, they’re to be confined to quarters.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Head up to the bridge, Spock,” Kirk continued, turning to the Vulcan as Dickerson organized his people and they took the ambulatory MACOs away. “Contact Starfleet and ask them to dispatch a tug to tow the alien ships to the nearest starbase. I’ll be in my quarters having a real heart-to-heart with Admiral Nogura.”

“Yes, sir,” Spock replied. “May I ask first... Was it as satisfying the second time?”

“Even more so, Mister Spock,” Kirk assured him, shaking out his sore hand, “because it was *real* this time.”

Spock raised an eyebrow, then walked off to comply with his orders.

A little while later, Captain Kirk sat at his desk in his quarters, having that heart-to-heart conversation with Admiral Nogura over a secured and scrambled subspace channel.

“*So, I take it you think you’ve proven your point, Captain—that MACOs don’t belong on starships?*” the admiral asked him.

“I do, sir,” Kirk adamantly confirmed. “That is, they don’t. But this wasn’t exactly the way I wanted to prove it.”

“*Don’t even try it, Kirk,*” the admiral warned, shaking his head. “*I know you better than that. You hated that I forced the MACOs on you, and you were happy for an excuse to arrest Finnegan. Perhaps if I’d assigned a different unit...*”

“With or without Colonel Finnegan, sir,” Kirk interrupted, “assigning MACOs to the *Enterprise* was going to be problematic either way. They simply don’t belong here.”

“*So you keep telling me. Nevertheless, you and the colonel do share some history—a detail that should have been taken into consideration when deciding which unit to assign.*”

“Don’t you mean a detail that *you* should have taken into consideration, Admiral?” Kirk asked him, point blank. “This was all your doing, wasn’t it?”

“*More or less,*” the admiral admitted, which was most likely the closest thing to a confession that Kirk was ever going to get. “*Finnegan felt the need to tell you that, did he?*”

“Yes, sir. God only knows why.”

“*Perhaps he’s more of a friend than you realize...so why don’t you release him.*”

“Because he disobeyed my direct orders as captain of the *Enterprise*, Admiral,” Kirk reminded him, “and he assaulted one of my officers. *And* his actions made it much more difficult for me to convince the alien commander that we wanted peace.”

“*And you, of course, have never acted against orders when your own judgment didn’t happen to agree with them,*” Nogura remarked. “*Those who live in glass houses...*”

“All right, Admiral, all right,” Kirk surrendered. “I’ll release him.”

“*Thank you. Look...I realize I’m not known for patting my subordinates on the back for a job well done, but I have to tell you... You did good, Jim. You found us a new ally that should be able to provide us with a wealth of information about the current goings on in the Klingon Empire, not to mention a back door into their space if we ever need one, and you turned back a triad of enemy vessels in the process.*”

“Four, actually,” Kirk corrected him, though the difference didn’t really strike him as being all that important. “We had to destroy one of them. Still, if you hadn’t sent those other ships when you did... Something about that bothers me though, Admiral.” Actually, a couple of things were bothering him, but he’d decided that for now he didn’t want to let on that he knew the admiral had a spy aboard his ship.

“*Oh? You don’t like dreadnoughts?*”

“On the contrary. At the moment I *love* dreadnoughts.”

“*What then?*”

“We’ve been at war with the Klingons for months now without any interference from the Organians.”

“*A handful of skirmishes on the border doesn’t constitute a war, Kirk,*” Nogura told him, not for the first time. “*I don’t know why you can’t bring yourself to understand that.*”

“Semantics, Admiral,” Kirk countered. “At any rate, Kargh and his fleet outnumbered us four-to-one when they showed up. Why’d they wait? Why didn’t they just cross the border and attack?”

“*Maybe your initial assessment was right, Jim,*” Nogura suggested. “*Maybe they were trying to goad you into firing into the neutral zone.*”

“I don’t think so, Admiral. That doesn’t feel right anymore.”

“*Then I don’t know, Jim,*” the admiral said, giving up on the subject a little too easily as far as Kirk was concerned, adding to his suspicions that Nogura knew more than he was letting on. “*We have been hearing some things lately. Bits and pieces—rumors coming out of some of the Klingon worlds close to the neutral zone. We don’t know what to make of them yet, but something’s going on in the empire, that’s for sure. That’s why Admiral Sheehan and I are anxious to hear what this Tzhal’Thahn commander has to say.*”

“Well, whatever might be going on in the empire, we should be trying to bring an end to these skirmishes, not escalating them. Filling our starships with military combat troops is counterproductive.”

“*I agree.*”

“You agree?” Kirk asked, genuinely surprised by that. “Then why did you...”

“*I want Finnegan and his troops transferred to the dreadnoughts. I’m assigning them to patrol the neutral zone border for the time being.*”

“Consider it done, sir,” Kirk happily replied. “And the *Enterprise*?”

“*The Enterprise is hereby reassigned to deep space exploration. I’ll forward formal orders within the hour. You’ll begin by mapping a previously unexplored sector that we’ve just started looking into. Initial probes have located a number of planetary systems.*”

“Understood, Admiral, and...thank you.”

“*You owe me, Kirk.*”

“On the contrary, Admiral, I’d say this makes us even.”

“*Don’t bet on it. Nogura out.*”

CHAPTER 12

Enterprise Security Ensign Jonathan Larson had been standing guard outside Colonel Finnegan's cell for some time. He'd long since grown tired of watching the prisoner pace angrily back and forth and had finally turned his back to him and taken up his post to one side of the force field where he could lean back against the bulkhead. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to find his friend Ensign Peter Kirk, the captain's nephew, approaching. "Hey, Peter," he said, pushing off of the wall as he greeted his friend. "I thought you had bridge duty."

"Fight's over, Lars," Peter informed him, addressing him by his nickname rather than by 'Jon,' which he preferred his friends use. "Commander Spock sent me down here."

Larson snickered and shook his head. "You and your ridiculous triple qualifications training. Engineering, Security, weapons... You're going to burn yourself out."

"It's not ridiculous," Peter argued. "It's the best way to get ahead aboard this ship. The captain likes his officers to qualify in as many positions as they can handle. Besides, I like to stay busy. Need a break?"

"Um...yeah, I could take five if you don't mind. Thanks."

"Sure."

"The prisoner's been babbling nonsense since he got here," Larson told Peter as he took his place. "You probably won't understand half of it, but give it a minute and you won't even hear him anymore."

"Got it. Take your time."

"Who the hell does Kirk think he is?" Finnegan asked as Larson walked off. "Hero captain or no, I'm gonna make 'im regret lockin' me up like this." Peter glared at him with disdain, and the colonel caught him. "Yeh have somethin' to say, Ensign?" he challenged.

Peter shook his head. "No, sir."

"Yeh look a bit familiar," the colonel told him as he stepped closer, right up to the force field. "Have we met somewhere before?"

"No, sir," Peter replied. "I probably just remind you of my uncle."

"Yer uncle, is it?"

"Yes, sir. Cap..."

"That's it!" Finnegan exclaimed, snapping his fingers. "Yeh're Peter Kirk, are yeh?" Peter nodded. "Aye, I see the resemblance now. I suppose yeh're gonna report me comment to yer uncle now. Canno' say as I blame yeh, boyo. Was no' a very smart thing for me to say in front of a security officer, now was it? I do tend to blow off a little steam when I shouldn't sometimes."

"I've heard that about you," Peter replied.

Finnegan snickered. "Aye, I bet yeh have. Well now...I'm a MACO. It goes with the territory, does it not?"

"May I ask you a question, sir?" Peter asked him, sidestepping the question. The less he said about MACOs the better most likely.

"Aye. Ask away, Ensign."

“Did you really give my uncle a hard time back at the Academy?”

“Aye, I did,” the colonel answered honestly and without hesitation.

“Why?”

“Because, young Ensign Kirk, I was an arrogant, over-confident snot who thought humiliatin’ underclassmen made me more of a man.”

“You were a bully,” Peter blurted out as though it were some great revelation.

“I took the age-old tradition of razzin’ plebes right to me heart and ran with it, aye.”

“But, why him?”

“Because he was every bit as arrogant as I was,” Finnegan replied as if that were all the explanation that anyone would ever need. But then he further explained, “And he was the classic bookworm. He was the perfect student—the perfect cadet, always earnin’ top grades, and the faculty mistook his arrogance for confidence.”

“You were jealous of him!” Peter exclaimed.

“Aye, I was,” Finnegan admitted, “and if yeh tell ‘im I said that, I’ll deny it all the way to me grave.”

“I won’t tell him, Colonel,” Peter promised. “I don’t think he’d believe it anyway.”

“Probably not,” Finnegan agreed. “He’d be forced to admit I’m human.”

“He’s hated you for so many years.”

“Sometimes people carry grudges, Ensign. Especially when someone has treated ‘em unfairly. And I certainly treated ‘im unfairly.”

“Still, that doesn’t make it right,” Peter opined. “Can’t be very good for him either, carrying all that anger around.”

“Aye, or any *other* kind o’ pain for that matter.” Peter looked the colonel in the eye. “Somethin’ for yeh to think about while yer grievin’, Ensign. Anyway, don’ be too hard on yer uncle. He’s a, extraordinary man, he is.”

“Extraordinary? Extraordinary how?”

“Way I see it, there are three kinds o’ people servin’ in Starfleet, Ensign—those who are born to serve, those who are made by the service, and those rare, special few who fit into both categories better than the rest o’ us fit into either o’ them.

“Those with the positive gung-ho attitudes in whose eyes the fleet can do no wrong? Those are the ones who were born to serve. Those who are made by the service are often as successful in their careers as those who were born to serve, but they’re usually a wee bit rougher ‘round the edges than the rest. That’s where I fit. I was a punk—barely made it into the Starfleet Academy in fact, but the MACOs straightened me right out after I blew it. Yer uncle’s one o’ those rare few. Born to serve and damn good at it—able to stay a little rough ‘round the edges while at the same time lettin’ the service mold him into one o’ the finest starship captains who’s ever served.”

Peter was starting to see the colonel in a whole new light. “After everything you did to him, you actually admire him,” he realized.

“Aye, o’ course I do. And do no’ tell him that, either.”

“Then why did you disobey his orders and board the alien vessel?”

“Because I disagreed with those orders. It *is* possible to disagree with the man and still admire him, yeh know.”

Peter snickered. “Yeah, I know.”

“Yeh know, yeh have a unique advantage here, Ensign Kirk.”

“Why, because my captain is also my uncle?”

“Because yeh’re startin’ yer career aboard the finest starship in the fleet under one o’ the best captains...maybe even *the* best captain who’s ever served. Yeh can learn a lot from that man...perhaps enough to rise to command yer own starship one day.” He paused for a moment, then grinned and said, “Now look what yeh’ve done.”

“What did I do...sir?” Peter asked him.

“Yeh calmed me down. I was workin’ up a good angry before I started talkin’ to yeh.”

Finnegan smiled at him—a genuine, warm, friendly smile—and Peter found himself returning it.

“Colonel Finnegan,” Lieutenant Dickerson called out as he appeared from around the corner in the corridor and approached the cell.

“Lieutenant?” Finnegan replied as both he and Peter looked toward the security chief.

Dickerson reached up and turned off the force field. “Captain Kirk would like to see you in his quarters, sir,” he told him. Then he looked at Peter. “Tag along, Mister Kirk.”

“Aye, sir,” Peter replied. Then he looked at Finnegan and gestured for him to step out of his cell ahead of him. “Colonel?”

“Aye, let’s go see what the good captain wants with me,” Finnegan said as he stepped out of the cell.

Kirk sat waiting at his desk, looking forward to the little victory that he was about to enjoy. The door buzzer sounded. He sat up straight, wiped the slight grin off of his face, and said, “Come in.”

The door slid aside to reveal Colonel Finnegan, still in his battle fatigues, flanked by Dickerson and Peter. “Colonel Finnegan, as requested, sir,” Dickerson announced.

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Kirk replied. “You and Ensign Kirk are dismissed. Colonel Finnegan, please come in.”

Finnegan stepped in and approached Kirk as his escorts left and the door slid closed behind him. The captain gestured toward the empty chair in front of his desk and said, “Have a seat, Colonel.” Finnegan gazed at the chair for a moment, and then sat down without saying a word. “Admiral Nogura has asked me to release you,” Kirk began, apparently not having expected him to say anything. “You *do* understand why I placed you under arrest, right?”

“O’ course I do, Jimmy-boy,” Finnegan replied. “I acted against yer orders.”

“Exactly right,” Kirk confirmed.

“And given the same circumstances, I’d do it again,” the colonel added.

“A commanding officer can’t have subordinates acting on their own in the middle of a crisis, Colonel,” Kirk pointed out. “You’ve been around long enough to know that.”

“I’ve also been ‘round long enough to know that Starfleet does no’ want officers who will blindly follow orders regardless of what their conscience and better judgment might tell ‘em,” Finnegan countered. “And I’m no’ yer subordinate. I know me duty, *Captain*, and me duty compelled me to take action.”

“Following *lawful* orders is part of that duty too, Colonel, regardless of whether or not you happen to agree with them.”

"This is a bit like the pot callin' the kettle black now isn' it?" When Kirk didn't reply, Finnegan went on, "Don' think I made me decision lightly, Jimmy. I knew full well I was probably goin' to lose good men and women over there."

Kirk sighed. With all the hostility he felt toward Finnegan, he hadn't stopped to think about the fact that the man had suffered losses. He felt bad about that. No, not just bad. He felt ashamed. If there was only one area in which he could empathize with the colonel, that was it—the loss of personnel under his command. "How many, Colonel?" he asked.

"Seven K-I-A. Four others wounded."

"I'm sorry," Kirk told him, "and I mean that sincerely."

"I know yeh do, Jimmy," Finnegan replied just as genuinely. "Thank you."

"It doesn't change what you did," Kirk was quick to point out, "but off the record, I guess I can't fault you for acting according to your conscience. God knows I've done that a time or two."

Finnegan's eyes narrowed. "Is that an apology I'm hearin', Jimmy-boy?" he asked.

Kirk stared at the man for a moment and almost...*almost*...smiled. Then he answered, "My first officer recently reminded me that past actions are not necessarily an indication of present intentions. From the moment you beamed aboard I've been judging you based on the way you treated me back at the academy. So, yeah, I guess that's an apology...Sean."

"Then I accept it as such...Jim."

"If nothing else," Kirk said, moving things along as quickly as he could, "this mission has proven the *Enterprise* is no place for MACOs."

"I don' necessarily agree with that, Jimmy-boy," Finnegan told him—no surprise there, "but I suppose we're just goin' to have to agree to disagree on that subject. No' that it matters much, o' course. Nogura put us here, so here we are and here we'll be stayin' 'til he says otherwise."

"He already did," Kirk told him, finally breaking the news.

"What's that yer sayin'?"

"There's a tug on its way here right now to tow the alien ships back to a starbase. My security personnel are coming with it to resume their duties aboard the *Enterprise*. As soon as it gets here, you and your people are transferring to the dreadnoughts."

Finnegan grinned. "Yeh played yer card with Nogura too early, Jimmy. Yeh should o' held it for later like I suggested."

Kirk finally returned the colonel's grin. "I didn't have to play it at all."

The colonel looked taken aback. "Yeh mean yeh actually got Nogura to... *Now I am* impressed."

"*Captain Kirk to the bridge, please,*" Uhura's voice came over the speaker. "*Captain Kirk, to the bridge.*"

Kirk hit the button on his desk. "Kirk here. What is it, Lieutenant?"

"*The transport tug U-S-S Al Rashid is approaching, sir,*" she reported.

Kirk stood up behind his desk. "On my way, Lieutenant," he told her as he reached for the button again. "Kirk out." He closed the channel, then walked out from behind his desk as Finnegan stood up with him. "When you're right, you're right, Colonel." He walked past Finnegan on his way out. "Nogura finally realized I'm right." He stopped briefly, just past Finnegan, and looked back at him. "And for the last time, stop calling me Jimmy."

Finnegan could only stand there and grin as Kirk left. Then he glanced around the quarters and said to the air, "Aw, Jimmy... Will yeh never learn, boyo?"

The transport tug *U.S.S. Al Rashid*, NCC-3802, had been specially outfitted with four tractor beams mounted to the corners of its container bracket. As she approached the alien vessels, she locked her beams onto them and brought them fully under her control.

"*We got them, Enterprise.*" the tug's captain confirmed over the comm. "*Not reading any additional hull stress on either of them. I think we'll be all right.*"

"Sounds good, *Al Rashid*," Kirk replied, reaching over the transporter console from in front of it, preparing to close the channel as he continued gazing at the view of the ships on the monitor mounted to the back wall. "Take good care of our new friends and have a safe voyage. Kirk out." He closed the channel.

As before, Scotty stood supervising Lieutenant Rand at the controls. Dickerson stood off to one side while Finnegan, Shirem, and Peterson stood by, awaiting their turn to step up onto the platform as six more returning *Enterprise* security officers stepped down off of the platform and headed for the exit.

"Those six are the last o' them, sir," Scotty informed the captain. "All of our people are back aboard, and far as I can tell they're bloody happy to be back, too."

"And the *Enterprise*?"

"A little worse for wear, sir, but nothin' a little tender lovin' care and a coat o' paint won't take care of. She held up as always..." He looked over at Finnegan. "...considerin'."

Kirk nodded, then turned to Finnegan and said rather happily, "Looks like it's time to say good-bye, Colonel."

"Aye, it does at that, Captain," the colonel agreed. He extended his hand to Kirk, who looked down at it suspiciously. "We might no' agree on everythin', Jimmy, and I know we'll never be the best o' friends, but I'm glad we can respect each other at least." He waited for a moment, but when Kirk still didn't shake his hand he snickered, then assured him, "I don't have a hand-buzzer, Jimmy. I'm no' the same prankster I used to be."

"Just wanted to be sure," Kirk told him, wearing a slight grin. And then, finally, he shook the colonel's hand.

"Take care o' yerself...Captain Kirk," Finnegan said.

"You too...Colonel Finnegan," Kirk replied.

"Oh, and Lieutenant Dickerson," Finnegan said, glancing over at the security chief as he, Sergeant Shirem, and Major Peterson stepped up onto the transporter platform.

"Sir?"

"The offer still stands, should yeh ever change yer mind."

"Thank you, Colonel, but my decision also stands. My place is here."

"As it should be," the colonel concluded, confusing Dickerson a little bit. Then, as he stepped onto the platform and took his place, he looked down at Kirk and said, "She's a fine ship, Jimmy. Take good care o' her."

"I always do." He heard Scotty clear his throat behind him and quickly added, "With my chief engineer's tireless help, of course." They stood ready to go, so Kirk glanced back over his shoulder at Rand and said, "Energize."

“I wish I could stay for dessert, Jimmy,” Finnegan said as he and the others began to sparkle with the transporter beam.”

“And stop...calling me...Jimmy,” Kirk told him, getting the last word as the MACOs beamed away.

“Stay for dessert?” Scotty asked, totally lost, after the transporter cycle ended and Rand powered down the unit. He looked at Kirk. “Now what the bloody hell do yeh suppose he meant by that?”

“God only knows, Mister Scott,” Kirk replied, shaking his head. Then, as he headed for the exit, he said, “Tell Mister Spock I’ll be in my quarters if I’m needed.”

“Aye, sir.”

As Kirk walked through the corridor and approached the door to his quarters, a rather attractive crewwoman approached him, walking the opposite way. “Good evening, Captain,” she said politely, smiling warmly at him.

“Good evening, Crewman,” he replied, smiling back. Then he looked back at her with quiet approval as his door opened in front of him. He stepped inside, and as he turned to look ahead and watch where he was going with his second step, a creamy pie sailed through the air and struck him square in the face.

He dragged his fingers across his eyes to clear them, then opened them to find a rather ingeniously designed ‘pie launcher’ standing in the middle of the floor between him and his desk, jerry-rigged from odds and ends and what appeared to be a few non-tech spare parts. “Damn you, Finnegan!” he then shouted, laughing through his anger in spite of himself. And with that a voice recording automatically began to play.

“Jimmy, me boy, I wish I could see the look on yer face right now, especially after yeh just finished shakin’ me hand, but I probably couldno’ see yer face anyway. Hope yeh like Boston Cream.” Kirk stepped forward to the front of his desk, still wiping the pie off of his face, to watch Finnegan’s image on his monitor. *“You, me friend, are the best straight man in the galaxy. Don’ ever change, Jimmy-boy. Until next time.”*

Kirk just stood there, helpless, staring at Finnegan’s frozen image. “Finnegan.”

* * * * *

“Excuse me, Admiral Nogura,” the admiral’s aide called over the intercom, *“someone calling herself Admiral Jane Smith just called. She’d like you to meet with her immediately and said you’d know where.”*

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” the admiral replied.

“But, sir, there is no Admiral Jane Smith listed anywhere in Starfleet Command.”

“Never mind about that, Lieutenant,” Nogura told the man. “It’s just an inside joke. I know who it really is and where to meet her. Thank you.”

Nogura stood facing the same group of shadowy figures that he’d faced earlier—that he’d faced too many times. “Get to the point and make it fast,” he told them. “I’m busy.”

"All right," the director replied. "I'm disappointed in you, Admiral. I thought we had an understanding."

"You thought wrong," he told her unapologetically.

"Did I?" she asked him rhetorically. "When we asked you to assign MACOs to the *Enterprise*, we thoroughly explained our reasons for that request and you agreed with them. We were counting on their presence aboard ship to act as a deterrent to..."

"Agreed, past-tense," Nogura clarified, interrupting her, "and I know what you were counting on. I told you the last time I was here that I didn't support you as a rule. I only did as you asked because it made sense to me at the time."

"I remember, however..."

"I also told you that I'd undo it the moment that changed, with no consideration to your opinion on the matter."

"Which is exactly what you did, Admiral, and now we're faced with a dilemma."

"You're breaking my heart," Nogura remarked.

"We should have you transferred out to a deep space station somewhere," the third deputy remarked in return.

"Go ahead and try it," Nogura challenged the man. "I dare you."

"Calm yourself, Admiral," the woman said in what was probably the most soothing tone of voice she could manage. "We didn't call you here to threaten you."

"Someone should tell *him* that."

"The bottom line here, gentlemen, is that assigning MACOs to the *Enterprise* didn't work out," the fourth deputy pointed out. "The reasons aren't important."

"I disagree," the second deputy stated.

"As do I," the third deputy chimed in. "I think the reasons *are* important. Or more precisely, the reason...singular."

"What are you talking about?" the director asked him.

The third deputy looked over at her. "I've done some digging, Madam Director," he told her. "As it turns out, our good friend the admiral here handpicked Colonel Finnegan's unit for the *Enterprise* assignment himself."

"So what?"

"So...Captain Kirk and Colonel Finnegan share a bit of history with one another from their Starfleet Academy days. To make a long story short, they hate each other, and Admiral Nogura was well aware of that fact when he selected Finnegan's unit."

"You're saying the admiral sabotaged the whole operation?" she asked him.

"That's *exactly* what I'm saying," he replied, point blank.

She turned her attention back to Nogura and asked him, "What about that, Admiral? Is there any truth to that accusation? Did you intentionally sabotage the operation?"

"What if I did?" he asked her defiantly. "What are you going to do about it?"

"There's always plan-B," she told him.

"Which you've already refused to tell me about," he reminded her.

"Unless you promise to help us, or at least to keep it to yourself," she reminded him.

"A promise that I've already told you I won't give you," he reminded her in return.

"Then we obviously have nothing more to discuss with one another," she concluded.

"I couldn't agree more," Nogura told her. Then he started turning toward the exit.

“Admiral,” one of the deputies called out to him. Nogura stopped just short of the exit and turned slightly, but didn’t face them again. “Go with the knowledge that you’ve made enemies here today.”

“Stay here in the shadows with the knowledge that you’ve made an enemy as well,” he threw back at whichever deputy had spoken. “Time will tell which one of us is worse off as a result.” And with that, he left them.

The director and first deputy looked at one another. “That went well,” the deputy said, his tone filled with sarcasm.

“You should have told me they knew each other beforehand,” she replied.

“I only found out about two minutes before he got here,” the third deputy said.

“So what do we do now?” the first deputy asked.

“We go ahead with plan-B,” the director replied.

All four deputies shifted in their chairs, sighed, cleared their throats, or whatever else might have made them feel a little less...*involved*. “Is that really wise, Director?” the fourth deputy then inquired.

The director looked over at him and asked him, “Do you have a better idea?”

“No,” he freely admitted, shaking his head, “but do you really believe we can pull off something that big without Nogura’s cooperation?”

“Not just without his cooperation,” the third deputy pointed out. “The question is, can we pull it off if he finds out about it beforehand, because if he does, he *will* interfere.”

“What are you saying?” the director asked him.

“You heard the man, Director. I just warned him that he’d made enemies of us all, and he threw it right back in my face. He is genuinely *not* afraid of us, and that’s dangerous.”

The director considered that for a few moments, then opined, “I think we can do it.”

“Without Nogura to manipulate the fleet?” the first deputy asked. “Are you sure?”

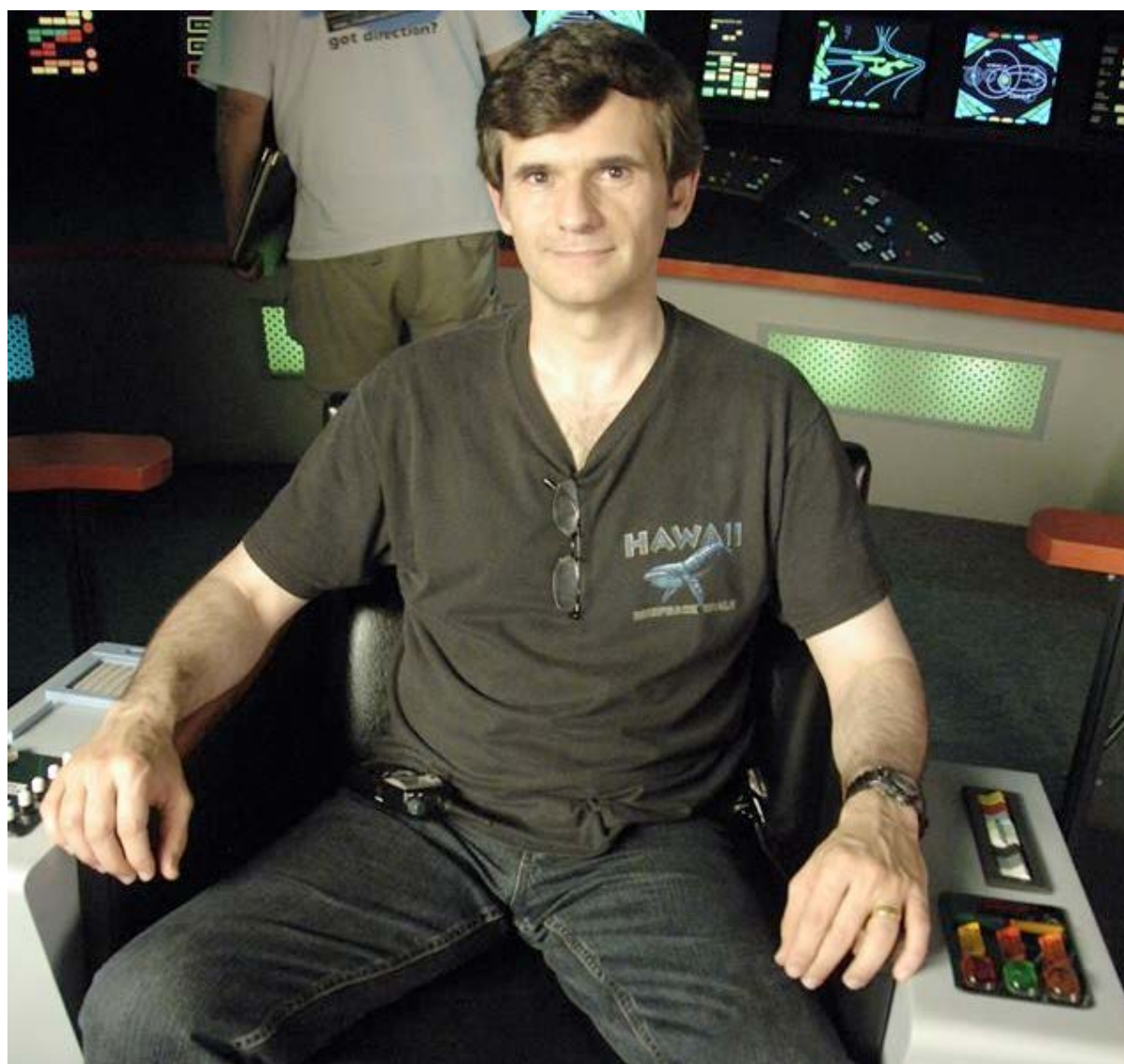
“I’m as sure as I can be,” she replied. “But we’re going to have to move a little slower than we’d planned and be extra careful. If anyone gets wind of what we’re doing...”

“We’ll end up on Rura Penthe for the rest of our lives,” the second deputy remarked.

“If we’re lucky,” the fourth added.

“We won’t be that lucky,” the director told them all, “and the rest of our lives won’t be that long.”

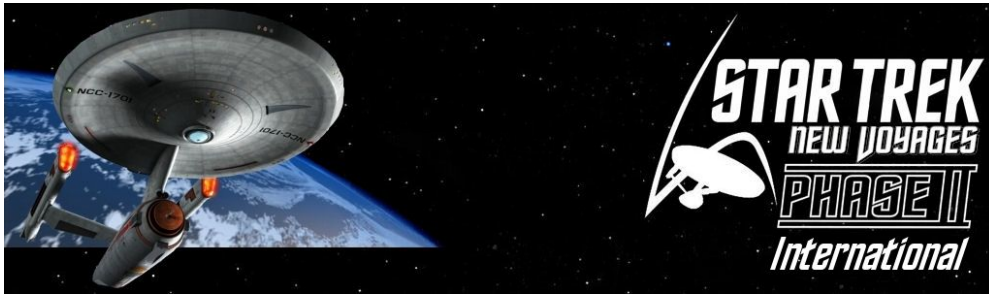
ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Glenn E. Smith is the author of the continuing “Solfleet” military science-fiction and “Legend of the Khi-Mara” fantasy series of novels, and writes the upcoming comic series “Sentient” for Dragon Phoenix Media™.

He joined the Star Trek New Voyages/Phase-II production crew in 2007 for the filming of the episode “Blood and Fire,” during which he served as a production assistant and bit player. He also served as Second Assistant Director for the filming of the episode “Enemy: Starfleet” and First Assistant Director for the filming of the vignette “Going Boldly” and the as yet unreleased episode “Bread and Savagery.” Glenn scripted two episodes for the series as well. Unfortunately, production of additional episodes was halted before either of them could be considered and/or scheduled for production.

ABOUT STAR TREK NEW VOYAGES: PHASE II



In the mid-1960s, one science-fiction series was made that would later become the most popular Sci-fi series in the world: Star Trek. What started as a simple television series went on to develop into a massive franchise of 726 TV episodes, 12 movies, many novels, dozens of computer games and other products. However, The Original Series (TOS) was only made for 3 seasons before the show was axed back in 1969.

James Cawley had already built the bridge, sickbay and several other sets from the original blueprints, when he teamed up with the director Jack Marshall and a number of fans whose aim it was to create the missing two years of the original five year mission under James T. Kirk.

The Star Trek New Voyages team started to create new episodes, based on the original series, to continue where Kirk and his crew had left off when their series was cancelled. They even numbered their episodes as the fourth season and released 11 new episodes (including the Pilot from 2003) and five vignettes, with three additional full episodes filmed, yet not released.

The series was made as a fan film project under the direction of James Cawley, who also played James T. Kirk in the New Voyages: Phase II incarnation until mid-2012 when Cawley passed on the iconic role of Captain Kirk to the professional actor Brian Gross. James continued to helm the show as Executive Producer, making costumes etc.

As this was a fan-film project, we could only work with actors who volunteered their time. This made it necessary to recast a number of actors since production began in 2003. There have been two "James T. Kirks" (James Cawley and Brian Gross), three "Mr Spocks" (Jeffrey Quinn, Ben Tolpin and Brandon Stacy), two "Dr McCoys" (John Kelley and Jeff Bond), three "Lt Uhuras" (Julienne Irons, Kim Stinger and Jasmine Pierce), five "Pavel Chekovs" (Jasen Tucker, Walter Koenig, Andy Bray, Jonathan Zungree and Brian Tubbs) and four "Hikaru Sulus" (John Lim, George Takei, J.T. Tepnapa and Shyaporn Theerakulstit). [See our cast list for full details.](#)

The production values are so high, that several of the original actors and crew have decided to join in and help them create the episodes. This includes Walter Koenig (Chekov) and George Takei (Sulu) who were able to resume their original roles in this fan-series. Other

original guest stars include BarBara Luna, Eddie Paskie, John Winston and Mary Linda Rapelye as well as Denise Crosby (“Tasha Yar”, TNG) and Bill Blair who originally starred in DS9). Original writers have also worked on the series including D.C Fontana and David Gerrold.

The visual effects for “Come What May”, “In Harm’s Way” and “Center Seat” were made for us by Doug Drexler under the alias “Max Rem”. Doug is known for his work on TNG and all subsequent Star Trek Shows and he even designed the “Enterprise NX-01.”

Also on board were, Daren R. Dochterman, known for his work on the Director's Cut of “Star Trek: The Motion Picture” DVD. For us, he worked on the opening title sequence and also provided “retro” visual effects for Mind-Sifter.

Joel Bellucci provided the visual effects for Blood and Fire and was then also joined by Pony Horton. Pony is probably the only VFX artist who actually worked with the original VFX artists that made the original series. This includes Hugh Wade, Frank Van der Veer, and Barry Nolan who taught Pony directly how to make the various effects, including the transporter. Pony took on the role of VFX Supervisor for Kitumba and later episodes.

Finally, Tobias Richter joined the team in 2009 who is well known for his beautiful space related visual effects. His work can be seen in Enemy Starfleet and all later episodes. Tobias is Germany’s top CGI-expert working from his Cologne based company, “The Light Works”. www.thelightworks.com

On June 23, 2016 - CBS released new [Fan-film guidelines](#) which made it impossible for us to continue making new episodes. It was decided to close Star Trek New Voyages and open our sets to the public as The Star Trek Original Series Set Tour under license from CBS. www.startrektour.com

Although the production of new filmed episodes has ended, Star Trek New Voyages episodes will remain online through our Star Trek New Voyages International website and fan-club.

As we can no longer make new fan-films, we have started to release a series of stories in eBook form, written by New Voyages crew member Glenn E. Smith. These stories were initially released in 2014 and are based on the New Voyages timeline. They are now being re-released as a way of providing additional stories to our fan-base around the world.

New Voyages Fan Club

What is this Fan Club, what can I expect?

The New Voyages Fan Club has been setup to provide our fans with access to addition downloads, information, posters, etc. We are celebrating the series and adding to the information and downloads about the series from our archives.

Here are some of the free perks available for members of our new fan area:

- Exclusive 16:9 Widescreen edition of Mind-Sifter to watch online or download
- Hi-res downloads of our HD episodes - see the episodes in even better quality
- Downloadable DVD-images (ISO) for all our episodes, complete with extras, subtitles and even artwork
- High-quality Poster and picture downloads
- Wallpaper with pictures of our ships, etc.
- Our exclusive newsletter for fans
- And more to be added in future.

More details can be found on our website:

<http://www.stnv.de/fanclub>

NEW VOYAGES: PHASE II EPISODES



This is a list of episodes in the order they were released (although not necessarily the order they were filmed). Please note that the episodes take place in a different order to that of the timeline when they take place. A list of [episodes in chronological order](#) can be found in the next chapter.

Clicking the episode title will take you to the respective episode page on our website. There, you can watch the trailer, get additional information and download or watch the episode online. Of course this only makes sense if you are reading this with a computer, tablet or smartphone. If you are using a Kindle with e-ink display, then what you can do on our website will be limited.

[Episode 00: Come What May \(Pilot\)](#)

After receiving a distress call, the USS Enterprise, commanded by Captain James T. Kirk (James Cawley), is assigned to investigate an intruder attacking the Primus IV colony. Once there, the crew encounters a strange alien life form that can produce visions of personal events displaced in time. These visions may hold the key to better understanding the threat they are about to encounter.

[Episode 01: In Harm's Way](#)

In an adventure that spans centuries, Captain Kirk fights alongside a U.S.S. Enterprise from the past to stop the devastating "Doomsday Wars" that should never have happened. In a universe forever changed by those events, the crew of the Enterprise must once again battle the powerful juggernaut known as the "Doomsday Machine."

[Episode 02: To Serve All My Days](#)

While a Klingons ship is threatening the Enterprise and Captain Kirk needs Chekov on the bridge, but Lt. Chekov is incapacitated with a debilitating disease that is causing him to age rapidly... a disease for which Dr. McCoy can find no cure.

Episode 03: World Enough and Time

A Romulan weapons test goes awry and snares the Enterprise in an inter-dimensional trap. Lt. Commander Sulu returns to find himself 30 years out of place and the key to saving the crew of the Enterprise as the precarious grasp on their own dimension begins to slip.

Episode 04-5: Blood and Fire – Parts 1 and 2 / Movie

Pursued and damaged by repeated Klingon attacks, the crew of the Enterprise must respond to the distress call from a Federation research ship. In a matter of hours the ship and crew will be consumed by a nearby star and the crew of the Enterprise will be consumed by an mysterious horror that threatens both ships as the Klingons watch and wait. The horrific story finds a battle damaged Enterprise caught between an incurable contagion that threatens to overrun the galaxy, the pull of a dying star, and Klingons poised to attack. Like all of the best Star Trek episodes, “Blood and Fire” finds the Enterprise crew facing their own human fears and failings as they have to weigh the costs and decide how much personal risk to take in order to save the people around them.

Episode 06: Enemy Starfleet

Attacked while exploring a new sector of space, Captain James T. Kirk and his crew find themselves thrust in the middle of a war. The USS Eagle, lost eight years before, is now in the clutches of a woman who bends starships and their captains to her will and has been reverse engineered into a fleet that is bent on domination and genocide. The Enterprise may be the only ship able to stop the Peshan homeworld from falling to Alersa and her enemy starfleet.

Episode 07: The Child

While the Enterprise passes through a strange energy cloud, a mysterious light force enters the ship and impregnates Ensign Isel who, within days, gives birth to a baby girl, Irska. The child grows up at a tremendous rate and while she appears to be human, it is feared she could endanger the ship after a strange alien spacecraft appears and puts everyone in jeopardy....

Episode 08: Kitumba

"Kitumba" depicts the Enterprise on a suicide mission to the heart of the Klingon Empire. Pulled in every direction by warlords and people that have their own agenda, the Kitumba suddenly finds himself confronting his very enemy: Captain James Kirk and the Enterprise. The choices he makes will resonate through the galaxy for years to come.

Episode 09: Mind-Sifter

When the crew of the Enterprise is forced to accept the death of Captain Kirk, Spock and McCoy must come to terms with their own grief, but when Spock discovers a plot by the Klingons to send Kirk back in time in order to destroy the Federation, it will take all the

courage and abilities of the crew of the Enterprise to rescue their beloved Captain in time before he succumbs to the horrific torture of the Mind-Sifter.

Episode 10: The Holiest Thing

Captain James T. Kirk's (Brian Gross) first encounter with the charismatic scientist Doctor Carol Marcus (Jacy King), who is specialized in Terraforming. Carol is the woman who one day will mother Kirk's son David and also break his heart. Doctor Marcus is leading a terraforming project on Planet Lappa III that goes horribly wrong and devastates the planet. Was it her fault? Or is a mysterious black market operation behind the catastrophe? Kirk and the crew of the refitted, USS Enterprise, investigate.

Vignette 01: Center Seat

While Sulu was away at Command Training, Lt. Desalle has made himself comfortable with the responsibility of running the Bridge of the Enterprise when Captain Kirk is off duty. Upon Sulu's return to Enterprise, he is dismayed to find Desalle in the Captain's chair hardly paying Sulu any mind. Once Sulu re-asserts himself as the XO on the bridge, he takes the Ship out for a shakedown based on his homework from Command Training ...

Vignette 02: No Win Scenario

After being pitted against Kirk in a Klingon version of the “no-win scenario,” Kargh would hunger for the day when he and Kirk would meet for real. His hunger is soon satisfied!

Vignette 03: 1701 Pennsylvania Av.

What would it be like if president Richard Nixon was a big Star Trek fan? Nixon was elected US-president in both 1968 and 1972, but he had to resign after a scandal broke about members of his staff bugging meetings in the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C., and recordings of the president's activities lacked 18 minutes that were never recovered.

Vignette 04: Going Boldly

A memorial service is held for lost crewmembers while the Enterprise is being refitted for new adventures. Introduces Brian Gross as James T. Kirk.

Vignette 05: Timeline Restored

Two Enterprises meet from different timelines. Can our Enterprise repair the timeline that had gone adrift in time?

EPISODES IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER

Our episodes were not made in the same order as they take place on the timeline. So to help you work it out, here is a list of our episodes in chronological order according to stardate (where available) and/or events in the episodes. A list of [episodes in the order they were released, can be found here](#).

Please note that this does cause some paradoxes as the Enterprise gets a refit with new nacelles in Going Boldly, as can be seen in The Holiest Thing, yet the stardate puts The Child much later with the old round nacelles. Kitumba logically takes place after "The Child" despite its stardate. For these reasons, we have placed The Child and Kitumba just before Going Boldly to better fit it in with the events and actors seen in the episodes. Two episodes also include flashback scenes from after the 5-year mission (World Enough and Time as well as The Holiest Thing), but we have not taken that into account.

Vignette 03: 1701 Pennsylvania Av. (Stardate: 20.07.1969)

What would it be like if President Richard Nixon was a big Star Trek fan? Nixon was elected US-president in both 1968 and 1972, but he had to resign after a scandal broke about members of his staff bugging meetings in the Watergate hotel in Washington, D.C., and recordings of the president's activities lacked 18 minutes that were never recovered.

Vignette 02: No Win Scenario (Stardate: Unknown)

After being pitted against Kirk in a Klingon version of the "no-win scenario," Kargh would hunger for the day when he and Kirk would meet for real. His hunger is soon satisfied!

Episode 00: Come What May (Pilot) Stardate: 6010.1

After receiving a distress call, the USS Enterprise, commanded by Captain James T. Kirk (James Cawley), is assigned to investigate an intruder attacking the Primus IV colony. Once there, the crew encounters a strange alien life form that can produce visions of personal events displaced in time. These visions may hold the key to better understanding the threat they are about to encounter.

Episode 09: Mind-Sifter (Stardate: Unknown)

When the crew of the Enterprise is forced to accept the death of Captain Kirk, Spock and McCoy must come to terms with their own grief, but when Spock discovers a plot by the Klingons to send Kirk back in time in order to destroy the Federation, it will take all the courage and abilities of the crew of the Enterprise to rescue their beloved Captain in time before he succumbs to the horrific torture of the Mind-Sifter.

Episode 01: In Harm's Way (Stardate: Unknown)

In an adventure that spans centuries, Captain Kirk fights alongside a U.S.S. Enterprise from the past to stop the devastating "Doomsday Wars" that should never have happened. In a universe forever changed by those events, the crew of the Enterprise must once again battle the powerful juggernaut known as the "Doomsday Machine."

Vignette 01: Center Seat (Stardate: Unknown - Between IHW and TSAMD)

While Sulu was away at Command Training, Lt. Desalle has made himself comfortable with the responsibility of running the Bridge of the Enterprise when Captain Kirk is off duty. Upon Sulu's return to Enterprise, he is dismayed to find Desalle in the Captain's chair hardly paying Sulu any mind. Once Sulu re-asserts himself as the XO on the bridge, he takes the Ship out for a shakedown based on his homework from Command Training ...

Episode 02: To Serve All My Days (Stardate: 6031.2)

While a Klingons ship is threatening the Enterprise and Captain Kirk needs Chekov on the bridge, but Lt. Chekov is incapacitated with a debilitating disease that is causing him to age rapidly... a disease for which Dr. McCoy can find no cure.

Episode 03: World Enough and Time (Stardate: 6283.4)

A Romulan weapons test goes awry and snares the Enterprise in an inter-dimensional trap. Lt. Commander Sulu returns to find himself 30 years out of place and the key to saving the crew of the Enterprise as the precarious grasp on their own dimension begins to slip.

Episode 04-5: Blood and Fire – Parts 1 and 2 / Movie (Stardate: 6429.2)

Pursued and damaged by repeated Klingon attacks, the crew of the Enterprise must respond to the distress call from a Federation research ship. In a matter of hours the ship and crew will be consumed by a nearby star and the crew of the Enterprise will be consumed by an mysterious horror that threatens both ships as the Klingons watch and wait. The horrific story finds a battle damaged Enterprise caught between an incurable contagion that threatens to overrun the galaxy, the pull of a dying star, and Klingons poised to attack. Like all of the best Star Trek episodes, “Blood and Fire” finds the Enterprise crew facing their own human fears and failings as they have to weigh the costs and decide how much personal risk to take in order to save the people around them.

Episode 06: Enemy Starfleet (Stardate: 7232.5)

Attacked while exploring a new sector of space, Captain James T. Kirk and his crew find themselves thrust in the middle of a war. The USS Eagle, lost eight years before, is now in the clutches of a woman who bends starships and their captains to her will and has been reverse engineered into a fleet that is bent on domination and genocide. The Enterprise may be the only ship able to stop the Peshan homeworld from falling to Alersa and her enemy starfleet.

Episode 07: The Child (Stardate: 9717.7)

While the Enterprise passes through a strange energy cloud, a mysterious light force enters the ship and impregnates Ensign Isel who, within days, gives birth to a baby girl, Irska. The child grows up at a tremendous rate and while she appears to be human, it is feared she could endanger the ship after a strange alien spacecraft appears and puts everyone in jeopardy....

Episode 08: Kitumba (Stardate: 2623.3)

"Kitumba" depicts the Enterprise on a suicide mission to the heart of the Klingon Empire. Pulled in every direction by warlords and people that have their own agenda, the Kitumba suddenly finds himself confronting his very enemy: Captain James Kirk and the Enterprise. The choices he makes will resonate through the galaxy for years to come.

Vignette 04: Going Boldly (Stardate: Unknown)

A memorial service is held for lost crewmembers while the Enterprise is being refitted for new adventures. Introduces Brian Gross as James T. Kirk.

Episode 10: The Holiest Thing (Stardate: 7713.6)

Captain James T. Kirk's (Brian Gross) first encounter with the charismatic scientist Doctor Carol Marcus (Jacy King), who is specialized in Terraforming. Carol is the woman who one day will mother Kirk's son David and also break his heart. Doctor Marcus is leading a terraforming project on Planet Lappa III that goes horribly wrong and devastates the planet. Was it her fault? Or is a mysterious black market operation behind the catastrophe? Kirk and the crew of the refitted, USS Enterprise, investigate.

ABOUT US

Star Trek New Voyages: Phase II, International is a small non-profit team dedicated to preserving the legacy episodes and running the fan-club. We started out in 2008 as the New Voyages download mirror for UK and Germany providing subtitles for the episodes in English and German. We expanded our operations to run the website in four languages (English, French, German and Spanish) with a team of translators for subtitles in up to 13 languages. We also organized the showing of our episodes in European conventions. With the closure of New Voyages in the USA, we took on full responsibility for maintaining the existing episodes while the production team turned the studio into an official set tour. We are now in the process of continuing to release more New Voyages episodes as free eBooks.

We are responsible for the following resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/user/startrekphase2DE>

<http://www.dailymotion.com/startreknewvoyages>

<https://www.facebook.com/startreknewvoyages>

<https://vimeo.com/startreknewvoyages>

<http://www.trekcon.de>

<http://forums.stnv.de>

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Further details available on our website: www.stnv.de

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