

STAR TREK PHASE II

CONSPIRACY

THE ENEMY OF MY ENEMY



A Star Trek Phase II Novelette by

GLENN E. SMITH

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Star Trek Phase II:
Conspiracy Part 3

Novelette #4
“The Enemy of my Enemy”
Glenn E. Smith

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The following events take place after the live-action episode

“Kitumba” www.stnv.de/kit

CHAPTER 1

Commander Dion Charvon sat confidently in unchallenged command of the warbird *Talon*, the Praetor's flagship, once more in her rightful place, yet well aware of the fact that a pair of the empire's newest and most advanced birds-of-prey were hanging back off of her vessel's flanks, one to port and one to starboard, acting as both escort and first-line defense as *Talon* approached the home world. She had seized the vessel from her over-ambitious former sub-commander, Tal, almost as soon as she'd beamed aboard, saving both it and its crew from destruction under his incompetent command, and had thwarted his subsequent desperate attempt to seize it back from her. Those troops who had chosen to side with her had killed most of his fellow mutineers, those so-called 'agents of the Tal-Shiar,' in combat, deck-by-deck, and the traitor Tal himself remained confined to the brig. Then she had encountered Kirk and his *Enterprise*, the Vulcan, Mister Spock, still at his side, while still in Federation space. Oh, how she had wanted to destroy that ship right then and there and rid the galaxy of Kirk and his crew, but after its conflict with the *Endeavour*, *Talon* had been in no shape for a fight. She had been forced to set her anger and her lust for vengeance aside for the good of the crew—*her* crew. Very soon now she would personally deliver Tal to the authorities and finally reap the rewards for her unyielding loyal service. Then, perhaps, some day, she might get another chance at the *Enterprise*.

Tal. He had been a loyal officer once, or so she had believed when he served beneath her authority. Now she couldn't help but wonder if he might have been plotting against her all along—if he might eventually have moved against her had she not been taken prisoner by Kirk and held captive in the Federation for so long. Not that it mattered now. He was under arrest, confined to the brig as a traitor and a mutineer, and she had her command back again. Such an act of blind arrogance, naming his fledgling agency after himself. The 'Tal-Shiar'—a madman's dream that was doomed to die right along with its creator. He deserved everything that Imperial Security Command would surely do to him once they got their hands on him.

The home world of ch'Rihan appeared in the center of the screen before her and grew swiftly, looking even more beautiful than she remembered, like a precious gem hanging over the thick black curtain of space. Finally, to be returning home after having been away for so long. To be drawing closer to the vivid violet mountains and spires of the Valley of Chula and the deep blue-green seas off the western coastlands of Trellara. She closed her eyes, just for a moment, and drew a deep, relaxing breath. She pictured the towering blood-green Cliffs of Ritannsi in her mind's eye and could almost smell the salt air and feel the cool sea breezes blowing gently through her hair.

The incoming communications alert tone sounded, drawing her reluctantly out of her reverie. "*Imperial Warbird Talon*," a voice called out over the speaker, its tone filled with authority. An orbital traffic controller whose words carried every bit of that authority with them. "*You have crossed the ch'Rihan planetary security perimeter and are approaching the defense perimeter. Transmit your approach authorization code now or risk being fired upon.*"

"Transmitting," Charvon responded quickly, nodding to the communications officer, who then transmitted the code.

A few moments later the controller informed them, "*Authorization code received and*

verified. Planetary defenses standing down.”

“Acknowledged,” Charvon replied. “Warbird *Talon* requests permission to approach and assume orbit.”

“Permission granted, Talon. On behalf of the Praetor, welcome home, Commander Charvon.”

Sarn, the former tactics lieutenant whom she had promoted to acting sub-commander, a man she had known and trusted when she commanded this vessel before, turned his eyes to Charvon with less than mild surprise as soon as the channel closed. “A personal welcome from the Praetor, Commander?” he inquired as he approached her. “He must still hold you in quite high regard.”

“Or in his sights,” the commander quietly countered, turning her eyes to the man. He spoke like the centurion, whom she’d already dismissed from the bridge because she *didn’t* trust him. He hadn’t moved against her and, in fact, had sworn his allegiance to her...but the fact remained that she didn’t trust him. Sarn, on the other hand, had proven his loyalty to her a long time ago. “The cloaking device *was*, after all, stolen under my command,” she pointed out, lowering her voice even further. “That failure will no doubt exact some small price. Or, perhaps...not so small.”

“Perhaps, Commander,” Sarn more or less agreed, “but you did expose Commander Tal’s treason and reveal to all who he truly is, and to what levels of treachery he is willing to descend. That will surely count for something.”

“Do you truly believe that, Sarn?” Charvon asked him.

“Recent field tests of our newest weapon systems have resulted in failure time and time again,” he pointed out. “One that we tested on a captured Federation cargo ship resulted in the loss of three of our most advanced birds-of-prey. Simply put, Commander, we are not even remotely ready for war, as Federation forces recently proved. Commander Tal...*former* Commander Tal...showed extremely poor judgment and acted rashly.”

“Indeed we are not,” Charvon agreed. “While captive, I discovered that the Federation Starfleet is much more vast and powerful than we ever suspected. Starships like *Enterprise* and *Endeavour* are merely the peak of a mountain whose base hides in the mists.”

“Entering orbit, Commander,” the helmsman reported.

“*Commander Charvon, you are ordered to report directly to Command for immediate debriefing,*” the orbital traffic controller broke in and informed her before she could even acknowledge the helmsman’s report. Had he been listening in all along?

“Understood,” she replied, raising her eyes slightly toward the ceiling. “Transmit the proper coordinates. I shall transport down momentarily.”

“Negative, Commander. Prepare for immediate transport.”

Charvon stood up, turned and faced Sub-Commander Sarn directly. “The bridge is yours, Sub-Commander,” she told him.

“Understood, Commander,” Sarn barely had time to reply before the transporter swept her away.

The capital city of Ra’tleihfi was by far the largest city on the surface of ch’Rihan—an immense metropolis of more than twenty-six million citizens. Among the many segments

it encompassed was the beautiful and wealthy Krocton Segment, which, in addition to serving as the Praetor's permanent residence and the Imperial Senate's central seat of government, was home to the largest ground base in the Rihannsu military. Fleet headquarters, its ground and space forces military academies, and even its largest confinement facility were all located there, as was the largest aerospace-port anywhere in the entire star empire. While certainly not unique to the city as a whole, or to the rest of the world for that matter, the combined ancient imperial and ultra-modern architecture that made up the segment's circular pattern, with its many tall, narrow towers and monumental spires topped with statues of the imperial raptor were always kept meticulously clean and in pristine condition, so that the Praetor would never look upon his world and see signs of decay.

Commander Charvon had been looking forward to seeing the Krocton Segment again almost as much she had been the Valley of Chula, Trellara, and the Cliffs of Ritannsi, but it was the confinement facility's proximity that rose to the forefront of her thoughts when she beamed in to find two very large and serious looking armed guards wearing Rihannsu Army gray and green waiting for her. They'd obviously been standing off at a safe distance from the platform, but now that her energized molecules had coalesced into her physical self once more, they stepped forward, hands on their sidearms, and stood almost shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her.

"You will come with us, Commander," the higher-ranking of the two said, making it very clear that it was *not* a request. He was a mere sub-lieutenant, she noted, and his partner was a lowly uhlan. Sending *them* to escort her was an insult, and while it was customary for armed escorts to place their hands on their sidearms while performing their escort duties, the fact that these two had done so already made her a little uncomfortable.

"Where?" she asked him as she stepped down off of the platform, raising her eyes to hold his gaze as he seemed to grow before them. He must have been a third again as tall as she was, him and his partner both.

"This way, Commander," the uhlan said, gesturing toward the exit.

She turned her eyes to him and glared. How dare he even speak to her in the presence of his own superior officer? Under normal circumstances she would have corrected him right then and there. But these were certainly not normal circumstances, and the sub-lieutenant did not seem to be bothered by it at all, so she simply replied, "Very well."

The guards escorted her out into the corridor, the sub-lieutenant leading the way while the uhlan followed behind her.

"Where are you taking me, Sub-lieutenant?" she asked as they walked single-file, drawing curious glances from the few passersby they encountered along the way, hoping that addressing him respectfully by rank might prompt him to give her a straight answer.

"Where we have been ordered to take you," the uhlan replied in his superior's place.

"I was addressing your superior officer, Uhlán!" she barked back over her shoulder. Then she faced front again and asked, "Where have you been ordered to take me?"

"To General Varnek's office, Commander," the sub-lieutenant finally replied.

"Did you say '*General*' Varnek?" she inquired with mild surprise as a great feeling of relief washed over her. "Varnek has been promoted to general?"

"He has," the sub-lieutenant confirmed.

"Good for him," she proclaimed. "It has been a long time coming."

Varnek had been her favorite academy instructor in their younger days—her mentor and her friend. Had he been so inclined, she would even have allowed him to be her lover. The fact that he hadn't been had spoken highly of his professionalism and solid ethics. While he had been hard on her whenever he felt he had to be, much harder than anyone she had ever known before, in fact, he had always taken the time to explain *why* he was being so hard, and in the end his methods had paid off. She had risen to command swiftly and had earned the Praetor's trust, largely due to his instruction.

General Varnek. She couldn't have been in better hands.

They stopped before a door bearing the new fleet insignia—that of a Rihannsu raptor holding the twin worlds of ch'Rihan and ch'Havran forward in its talons. Twin worlds. Charvon grinned with the irony. A pair of twins had never been so different. Varnek's rank and name appeared in bold letters beneath the symbol, almost as if the two were synonymous. The sub-lieutenant reached up and pressed the buzzer, then stood silently and waited for the response to come.

"Yes?" that response finally came over the speaker in the wall several seconds later.

"Sub-Lieutenant Tobek, sir," the guard informed him. "We have brought Commander Charvon to you as ordered, General."

"Enter."

The sub-lieutenant pressed the second button to open the door and led Charvon inside, and the first thing she noticed when her eyes fell on her old mentor sitting behind his large desk was that he had grown old and gray, and that he looked even more hardened by his many decades of military service than she remembered. As was appropriate for a flag-grade officer stationed at fleet headquarters, he wore his pristine class-1 uniform bearing all of his medals and awards. His office was sparsely furnished, as she'd known it would be—he had never been one for filling space just because it was there—but in one corner he did proudly display his flags and his awards certificates and numerous photos of him mingling with the highest leaders of the fleet and members of the political elite, telling the story of his long and very honorable military career.

"Welcome home, Commander," Varnek said, looking up at her as she approached, his voice rough and gravelly, sounding almost as though he'd just swallowed broken glass.

"Thank you, *General* Varnek," she replied as her escorts gently took hold of her arms to stop her from approaching too closely.

"Please," he said, addressing the guards, "allow her to come closer. I am certain she will do me no harm."

The guards released her and Charvon stepped up to the general's desk, then saluted, fist-to-chest. "General."

"Commander," Varnek acknowledged, nodding and gesturing toward the chair beside her. Then, as she took a seat, he nodded to the guards. They obediently backed off and posted themselves on either side of the door.

"It is very good to see you again, General," Charvon told him.

"And you, Dion," he replied. "You look none the worse for wear after so much time spent in Federation captivity...not to mention after having to thwart armed insurrection and mutiny. Tell me, does your former Sub-Commander Tal still live?"

Straight to the point. "He does, General," she answered just as directly. "He awaits his

fate aboard the *Talon*...in the brig. His fellow mutineers, those who were not killed while attempting to carry out their insurrection, have all been confined as well.”

“Then I have but one immediate, though personally regrettable, duty to perform.” He turned his hard gaze to the guards. “Guards.”

Charvon glanced back over her shoulder to find the guards approaching her. “What...” She turned back to the general with confusion as they positioned themselves behind her, one at each shoulder. “What is this, General?”

Ignoring her inquiry, Varnek told the guards, “Commander Charvon is under arrest.”

Charvon gasped and her eyes grew wide as the guards grabbed her by her arms and pulled her to her feet, then twisted her arms up behind her back and locked restraints over her wrists and forearms.

“The charges,” the general continued, looking her dead in the eye, “are negligence in the performance of duty, desertion, and suspicion of espionage and treason.”

“*Desertion!*” she shouted, turning green in the face. “*Espionage and treason!* General, I understand the negligence charge, but I am no traitor! I am a loyal imperial officer! I was tricked! I was taken prisoner! Held against my will!”

Varnek glared at her, allowing her tirade, and then replied calmly when she finally fell silent, “And now you are taken prisoner once again, Dion.” When it appeared that she could find no words with which to respond to that, he ordered the guards, “Take her to the confinement facility. Capital crimes protocols.”

“Yes, General,” the guards replied together.

“I am no traitor, General!” she repeated, struggling as the guards pulled her backward, away from his desk, and then turned her toward the door. Then, as they practically dragged her toward the exit, she looked back over her shoulder as best she could at her former mentor and warned him, “You will regret this betrayal, Varnek!”

So confused and angry was she over that betrayal—not to mention more than a little frightened—that she could barely think straight as the guards half-dragged her out of General Varnek’s office, down the corridor, and around a corner toward the headquarters building’s front doors, drawing inquisitive glances and curious stares from everyone they passed along the way. How was she going to get herself out of this mess? If even Varnek had turned his back on her, to whom was she going to explain what really happened to her? How was she going to clear her name...not to mention that of her family, who would no doubt pay a price for her alleged crimes themselves?

“Do you know who I am?” she asked the guards as they led her outdoors. The day was a beautiful one, sunny and bright, warm but not *too* warm, with a gently blowing easterly breeze. Were it not for her present circumstances, it would have been a perfect day.

“Yes,” the sub-lieutenant replied, “and we know who the general is as well.”

“You lose, Commander,” the uhlan then told her, seemingly pleased by the fact.

“When this is over and I have been exonerated, I will remember how you treated me,” she warned them as they led her toward the rear of a parked security vehicle. “I will repay you in kind a thousand fold.”

“You have been arrested for treason, Commander,” the sub-lieutenant reminded her as his partner opened the back of the vehicle. “I doubt you will ever be free again to do so.” He scooped her up in his arms and literally threw her into the back of the vehicle and then closed

the door while his partner started the motor. Then he joined his partner in the front seat and they drove away from Headquarters without further delay.

It took a little while to drive across base—it was, after all, a very large base—during which time Commander Charvon considered her situation very carefully. That the cloaking device had been stolen while under her command and control was an indisputable fact. She bore the responsibility for allowing that to happen. She accepted that and could not offer any argument against it in her own defense, so perhaps she did deserve to be punished to some extent. But she had been a victim, not a participant, and of the rest of the charges she was innocent. That was the truth.

Yes, the truth. Above all else, she had the truth on her side. She would be debriefed, perhaps even interrogated, and that truth would come out. The charges would be dropped, except perhaps for the charge of negligence. Then, if she was fortunate, she would be allowed to return to duty. She might not get her own ship again, at least not right away, but at least she would be allowed to serve. The empire had invested too much in her to simply throw it all away for nothing.

The vehicle slowed suddenly and came to a complete stop just short of a shimmering energy barrier whose hum she could clearly hear even inside the vehicle—the confinement facility's security barrier. The guards began communicating with someone over the vehicle's built-in comm. She could see them through the thick transparent safety shield that separated her from them, speaking, though she couldn't hear a word of what they were saying, but she had no doubt they were following whatever protocols were necessary for them to gain entry.

Moments later the section of barrier directly in front of them powered down and they pulled forward to the inside of the perimeter. Moments later they parked very close to the main entrance and got out, then dragged her out of the back, set her down on her feet, and then held her by the arms as they walked her toward a second energy barrier in front of that entrance. The barrier deactivated automatically as they approached it, allowed them to pass, and then powered on again behind them as they opened the front door and went inside.

Another guard, wearing a uniform almost identical to those her escorts were wearing, though his bore more gray than green—the uniform of a military correctional officer—looked up at them from behind the station where he was sitting, its lights shining on him in a variety of colors—a console consisting of several video monitors, computer equipment, and a retinal scanner that faced out ahead of the desk. “State your business, Sub-lieutenant,” he demanded.

“Prisoner delivery,” the sub-lieutenant replied. “Capital crimes protocols.”

The correctional officer grinned as he slowly stood up behind his console, folded his hands behind his back, and glared at Charvon through threatening dark eyes. “Step forward and peer into the retinal scanner,” he told her—clearly an order rather than a request.

“I will not,” she replied defiantly, holding his gaze. She had realized before she spoke that that probably was not the wisest way to respond to him, but she had to ensure that he remained aware of his station as compared to hers before they went any further.

“Yes, you will,” he countered, and before she could say another word her escorts both grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her forward, face to the scanner.

The correctional officer gazed down at one of his monitors for a few moments, then said, “Prisoner identification...entered and verified. Dion Charvon of Clan Charvanek.” Then he gestured toward a pair of tall vertical posts standing off to the side of his station, between

which anyone wanting to continue farther into the facility would have to walk—a scanning device—and ordered, “The prisoner will step forward and stand between the scanner posts.” Charvon didn’t budge. “Now, Prisoner.”

She didn’t have any weapons or hidden devices on her, so, if only to avoid having her hair pulled again—they would certainly pay for that one day—she stepped forward and stood between the posts. “I am not armed,” she informed them all.

Ignoring her, the confinement guard powered up the scanner and the posts instantly bathed her in bright orange light. “It appears you are not,” he confirmed after a moment. He deactivated the scanner, then stepped out from behind his console and walked over toward the interior door that stood in the wall a few paces ahead of her. He waved her forward, and when she stepped out from between the scanner posts he turned his palm toward her to stop her and then added, “Appearances, however, can deceive.”

He glanced over at the guards who’d brought her in and gestured for them to join him, which they did immediately. He instructed them to, “Remove her restraints.” Then, after the uhlan had done so, he looked Charvon in the eye and said, “You will remove your uniform.”

“What?” she asked him, thinking that she could not possibly have heard correctly.

“I said, you will remove your uniform. Tunic, pant, and boots.”

“I will not!” he adamantly declared.

The confinement guard backhanded her across the face with lightning speed before she ever saw it coming, and by the time she turned her head back to face him defiantly, a thin trail of bright green blood had oozed from her split lip and run down over her chin. “You will remove your uniform, or we will remove it for you,” he told her.

“No, I will not,” she declared defiantly.

The correctional officer sniggered, then stepped back behind his station for a moment. When he returned, he held something in his hand—a narrow silver-metal rod, about a meter long, with a handle and lever on one end and a glowing red tip on the other. “This device,” he began to explain, “in case you are not familiar with it, is a Klingon pain-stick. If you force me to use it on you, you will feel pain throughout your entire body such as you have never felt before, and you will quite probably soil yourself. Please, help me to spare you the indignity. Remove your uniform.”

Charvon stared at the rod in his hand and swallowed. She *was* familiar with the device and had seen one used once. She had no desire to see it used on her, but she could not allow this man to get the best of her. She licked her suddenly dry lips, swallowed once more, and then looked him in the eye and told him, “No.”

He punched her hard; knocking her back into her escorts’ arms, then stepped forward and started unfastening her uniform. She resisted at first, but then he raised the stick.

“All right!” she shouted, raising her hands up in front of her in surrender, still stunned by the force of the blow and staring at the stick’s business end. “I will remove my uniform.”

Her escorts stood her up and steadied her, then dropped their hands to their sides.

She had failed. She had allowed her captors to win. But the stick... She remembered what had happened to the man she had been forced to watch being tortured so brutally—how he had screamed in agony until he choked and convulsed beyond his ability to resist, how he had indeed soiled himself, and how his blood had poured from his nose and ears before he finally, mercifully, died. Perhaps compared to that, the humiliation of having to undress in

front of these men was not so bad a thing to have to bear. “You are going to stand there and watch me undress?” she asked as she unzipped and removed her first boot.

“Yes, we are,” the correctional officer answered plainly.

She tossed that boot aside and then unzipped the other one. “Have you men no sense of basic decency?” she then asked as she pulled that one off and tossed it aside as well.

“We have our duty,” the sub-lieutenant replied.

“Oh, I see,” she said as she removed her sash and then started unfastening her tunic. “So you consider watching me disrobe to be part of your duty.”

“In addition to lesser offenses, you have been charged with espionage and treason,” the sub-lieutenant reminded her as her tunic started falling open to reveal the white satin shift she wore underneath it. “Espionage and treason are capital crimes, punishable by death upon conviction. General Varnek himself has ordered that you be dealt with in accordance with all capital crimes protocols.” Having completely unfastened her tunic, she pulled it off tossed it away. “Surrendering your uniform is one part of those protocols.”

“A traitor to the empire cannot be permitted to wear the uniform,” the uhlan added as Charvon bent forward to pull her pant down and step out of it.

“Consider yourself fortunate, *Prisoner*,” the sub-lieutenant suggested. “Had you never served as a command officer in the imperial fleet, General Varnek might just as easily have ordered you stripped bare.”

“An order which I remain authorized to issue myself, should you give me cause to do so,” the correctional officer warned.

With only her white underpants and short shift for clothing—she was thankful to have been left with that much—Charvon tossed her black uniform pant away and then asked the correctional officer, not without a healthy dose of facetiousness in her tone, “Shall we?”

The correctional officer sneered at her, then led her and her escort through the interior door and down a central corridor that was lined on both sides with cells, pain-stick, she noted, still in hand. A number of those cells were occupied, and those occupants appeared to be nothing if not broken completely. She could hardly imagine what they might have been put through during their incarceration.

“Control yourself and follow orders and you will be fed and given water,” he told her as they walked. “Cause a problem...*any* problem...and you will be disciplined.”

Of that, she no longer had any doubt.

They came to a particular cell and stopped. It was empty. The correctional officer deactivated the force field and then turned his eyes to Charvon’s escorts and tilted his head toward the cell. They shoved her none-too-gently inside. The correctional officer raised the force field again, glared in at her for a moment, and then led the guards back up the corridor.

* * * * *

Having finally succeeded in bringing hostilities with the Klingon Empire to a final end, at least for the time being—yes, the Kitumba had played him, but he could live with that as long as the Federation was safe and secure—Captain James T. Kirk sat in the center seat on the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise* and watched as the distant Space Station K-7 started

to grow in the center of the main screen. The destroyer *Saladin* and the fully repaired starship *Constitution* were still there, he noticed, circling the station in a wide-arching orbit as though they didn't have a care in the world. That meant that not only was *Saladin*'s Captain Ray Martin waiting to have a drink with him, which he'd been looking forward to, but also that Admiral Sheehan and Commodore Probert were still on station, waiting for a face-to-face debriefing. Well, he knew exactly what he would tell them. The impending Klingon invasion that the Romulans had attempted to use to their advantage had been real. Their forces really had been gathering for a massive assault, just as the data from Epsilon-Nine had indicated. The Kitumba had used him and the *Enterprise*, and by extension Starfleet, as pawns to take advantage of the volatile situation and rid himself of an irritating thorn in his side—that dishonorable and egotistical fool, Warlord Malkthon of the House of Duras. Malkthon was dead—vaporized at the hands of the Kitumba, and Kargh had been raised to warlord in his place. Kirk didn't know yet if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but for now the Klingons were pulling their forces back from the neutral zone border and the Federation was safe. *Enterprise* could resume its search for that 'renegade' Romulan bird-of-prey.

He'd spoken to Admiral Sheehan a while ago and requested permission to do exactly that, but Sheehan had opined that the Romulan vessel had likely returned to home space and had ordered him back to K-7. In truth, the admiral was probably right, but Kirk couldn't help but think there was a chance that vessel was still ghosting around Federation space, looking for another target, albeit a easier, less well defended one. Nonetheless, *Enterprise* had been ordered back to K-7, so to K-7 *Enterprise* was going.

"Assuming assigned position off Station K-seven, Captain," Lieutenant Xon reported from the helm, where he was pulling a shift to broaden his experience.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk replied. He stood up, stretched a little, and then headed for the turbolift, stopping behind Lieutenant Uhura's communications station on the way. "Lieutenant Uhura, please send formal greeting and my personal regards to Mister Lurry and tell him that I intend to stop by and see him as soon as I've met with Admiral Sheehan and Commodore Probert. Then contact the admiral directly and advise him I'm on my way over."

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Spock, you have the con," he said as he stepped into the lift.

Kirk materialized in the station's transporter room to find Admiral Sheehan standing there beside the controls console, waiting for him, while the operator busied himself doing whatever it was transporter operators did when they didn't want to talk to the superior officer standing nearby. The admiral stepped forward and extended his hand as Kirk stepped down off of the platform. Kirk took it and shook it firmly. "Admiral Sheehan," he greeted his older and significantly larger superior officer.

"Well done, Jim," the admiral returned, speaking in that calm, soft tone of voice that always took those meeting him for the first time off guard. "New data coming in from the Epsilon Nine array indicates Klingon forces are indeed standing down and withdrawing all along the border. Commodore Probert just beamed back to the *Saladin* with Captain Martin and is on his way back to his command post, and most of our ships have moved on to their next assignments." He released Kirk's hand. "I must say, I'm looking forward to reading your

report when I get a chance. I'm curious to learn just how you pulled it off."

No drink with Ray. That disappointed Kirk. He and Ray were old friends and hadn't had a chance to sit down together for quite some time. "Reading?" he asked the admiral. "I thought you wanted a face-to-face debriefing first."

"No time," Sheehan told him directly. "You're assignment for Starfleet Intelligence is over and I'm releasing the *Enterprise* back to Admiral Withrow immediately. He requests you contact him as soon as possible."

"I see," Kirk replied. Then, as he turned and stepped back up onto the platform, he asked, "Before I leave, Admiral, tell me... What happened with the Parliament Conference?"

"Ah. The Federation Council granted the Tzhal'Thahn indefinite asylum and offered to enter into an alliance with their hegemony, which really *is* located on the far side of the Klingon Empire, so it'll likely be a while before our guests make it home to present our proposal to their government. The First Federation has no taste for war, so won't agree to aid us in any conflict, but they have granted us free peaceful access to and through their territory whenever we might need it. Overall, the conference proved beneficial on some level to all concerned."

"That *is* good news. And the bird-of-prey we were searching for before you called us off? Anything more definitive on that?"

"Negative," the admiral replied with obvious regret. "We're still assuming it fled back across the neutral zone to Romulan space."

"I see. Well, I guess you can't win them all, Admiral." He turned his eyes to the transporter operator. "Energize."

As soon as Kirk had beamed back to *Enterprise*, he stepped down off of the platform and headed straight to the controls console, reached over it, and pressed the comm. button. "Kirk to bridge."

"*Uhura here, sir,*" the response came immediately.

"Send my regrets to Mister Lurry, Lieutenant. Tell him we've been called away and that I'm sorry I don't have time to visit this time around. Then contact Admiral Withrow at Starbase Four and pipe it down to my quarters. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"*Aye, sir.*"

Minutes later, Kirk walked into his quarters, brought up the lights, and then turned on his terminal as he sat down at his desk. Admiral Withrow's image appeared immediately on the screen, looking relieved. "Admiral Withrow."

"*Welcome back, Jim,*" the admiral said. "*It's good to hear from you. In fact, it's good to see you still alive after where you've just been.*"

"Thank you, sir. Admiral Sheehan told me you needed to speak with me immediately. What can I do for you?"

"*The Endeavour has taken the Romulan spy who was posing as Ambassador Sarek to a secure classified location, but Admiral Nogura worries that the Romulans, or perhaps more likely their Federation co-conspirators, might try to find him and snatch him away from us. We've waited as long as we can, Jim. I want you to get started on that investigation*

Nogura mentioned and try to identify who those co-conspirators are before they get that chance.”

“Does Admiral Nogura have any specific suspects in mind?” Kirk asked, wondering why Nogura wasn’t talking to him directly, rather than through a middleman.

“Almost assuredly,” Withrow replied, “and you could probably make one damn good guess as to who they work for. Nogura isn’t pointing any fingers, though. Matter of fact, he’s being as tightlipped as an Aldebaran shell mouth on this one. I think he’s a little afraid, to be honest with you.”

Afraid? Nogura? “Pardon me, Admiral, but I don’t think Admiral Nogura’s afraid of anything.”

“All right, then he’s being very careful,” Withrow amended. “In any case, he’s not saying anything more than he has to. You will recall, however, that he did drop a hint as to where he thought you should start.”

“I recall that all too well, Admiral,” Kirk confirmed.

“Good, then get right on it and keep me apprised. Starbase Four, out.”

The screen went black. Kirk thumbed the ‘call’ button, wishing sincerely that there were another way—that there were a better place to start. “Kirk to bridge.”

“Uhura here, sir,” the lieutenant responded as her image lit up the screen.

“Find out which of the dreadnoughts Colonel Finnegan and his MACOs are currently stationed aboard—the *Alliance* or the *Federation*—and set up a rendezvous with them.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mister Chekov, Mister Xon, plot a course and engage at warp two as soon as you have the coordinates.”

“Aye, Keptin,” Chekov replied for the both of them from off screen.

Kirk closed the channel, then sat back in his chair, exhausted.

“Finnegan.”

CHAPTER 2

Captain Kirk had tried to get some sleep...and failed. He'd stripped off his uniform and laid down hours ago, but images of the aftermath of those recent Romulan attacks on Vulcan, Andoria, Tellar Prime, and most especially Babel, had haunted his thoughts and held slumber at bay. Now he lay atop his bed with the lights set on low, hands folded behind his head, staring up at the ceiling without really looking at it, back in uniform, except for his gold command shirt, which lay draped over the foot of the bed, and his boots, which were sitting side-by-side on the deck beside it. *All those millions of innocents*, he pondered, still thinking about those images of destruction. *Who could have done such a thing? How could anyone in the Federation join forces with the Romulans and murder so many millions of innocents?*

"Bridge to Captain Kirk," Lieutenant Uhura called suddenly over the intra-ship.

Kirk rolled over onto his side, reached out to the communications panel in the wall and pressed the button, then answered quietly, "Kirk here."

"Rendezvous with the Dreadnought Alliance in ten minutes, sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Kirk replied as he sat up and dropped his feet to the deck. "On my way." He closed the channel and then reached for his boots. *Finnegan*, he thought as he pulled the first one on. *I can't believe I have to see him again. Come to an understanding with the guy and the next thing you know...* He pulled on his second boot. *...Boston crème pie, right in the face.* He zipped up his boots, stood up, and then reached for his shirt. *After all these years, still so juvenile. Oh well.* He pulled it on over his head as he started walking toward the door. *Oh well. At least it tasted pretty good. I just hope he realizes this is no time for practical jokes.*

Kirk stepped out onto the bridge, back in full starship captain mode after stopping by the sickbay and getting something to keep him wide awake and alert from Doctor McCoy, who naturally had scolded him for not getting enough sleep the entire time he was there. He looked up at the main viewscreen to see the *Alliance* holding relative station in front of them, and marveled once more at how much bigger and more powerful than his own vessel the dreadnoughts looked, even though there really wasn't *that* much difference the two. A thicker primary hull, a larger engineering hull to house the additional shuttlecraft bay, and the lower outboard warp nacelles to make room for the third one above and between them. Aside from a few other, more minor differences, that was about it.

"Lieutenant Uhura, hail the *Alliance*," he ordered as he passed her station on his way to the center seat.

"Aye, sir."

"Mister Spock," he called out as he stepped down onto the central deck and then up again to stand in front of his chair, "report, please."

"Sensors showing no other vessels in the area, Captain," the first officer replied from his science station, where he was standing over and peering into the sensor scope.

"Continuous scans," Kirk ordered. "We're practically on top of the Klingon neutral zone border out here. I don't want any surprises."

“Understood, Captain.”

Uhura turned toward Kirk and advised, “I have Captain Montoya standing by, sir.”

The captain took his seat. “On the screen, Lieutenant,” he directed.

The image of the *Alliance* wavered and rippled and was then replaced by an upper-body view of Captain Rachel Montoya, sitting in command on her ship’s bridge. Kirk knew her to be ten to twelve years older than he was, and in some ways it showed, but she was still a very lovely woman, at least in his opinion, with longer than shoulder-length black hair only lightly touched with gray and large dark brown eyes that sparkled under the lights. She was wearing her green captain’s wrap-around shirt, he noted, and he couldn’t help but also notice that her generous...assets appeared to be trying to push their way out of it. Had she not been wearing a black tee-shirt underneath it, her appearance might have proven to be even more of a distraction than he suspected it already was.

“Captain Montoya,” Kirk said by way of greeting. “It’s good to see you again.”

“*You as well, Captain Kirk,*” she replied in her slight Latin-American accent, though somewhat less than pleasantly. Columbia or Argentina? Kirk could never remember which one she called home. Maybe it was Brazil? “*Now would you mind telling me why I’m seeing you again right here and right now?*”

“I’d be happy to, Captain,” he told her, “but not over the comm. Request permission to come aboard your vessel.”

“*Granted,*” she replied with emphasis. “*I’ll see you in my transporter room in a few minutes. Alliance out.*”

Kirk stood up and headed back to the turbolift as the view of the dreadnought returned to the screen. “The ship is yours, Mister Spock,” he said on his way out.

“Yes, sir.”

“Hello, Jim,” Captain Montoya said with a smile when Kirk finished materializing in one of *Alliance*’s transporter rooms. “Welcome aboard the *Alliance*...finally.”

“Thank you, Rachel. I look forward to seeing more of her.” Kirk replied, returning her warm and friendly smile with one of his own as he stepped down off of the platform to shake her hand, pretending not to have noticed that her captain’s green wraparound shirt was in fact a wraparound *dress* that wasn’t too many inches longer than the standard female skirt variant, held closed at the waist by the ship’s logo in the same way the shirt was. Then he glanced briefly over at the transporter operator and told Montoya, “What we have to discuss is pretty sensitive. Can we talk privately somewhere?”

“Briefing room, just up the corridor,” she answered, nodding. “Come with me.” She led him out into the corridor and turned to their left, then told him, “It’s a lucky thing you contacted me when you did, Jim.”

“Why’s that?” he asked her.

“I’d just received orders to move to the Romulan neutral zone. Ten minutes later and we’d have already been on our way there when you called. You’d have had to catch up.” She grinned mischievously and added, “And I doubt you could have.”

Kirk laughed and smiled back at her. “If that’s a challenge, Rachel, I have to warn you. My chief engineer prides himself on having raised the fastest ship in the fleet.”

“So I’ve heard,” Montoya replied as they turned toward the briefing room, prompting the door to open just ahead of them. She led him inside and toward the far end of the table as the door closed behind them. “Okay, Jim, what’s this all about?” she asked him, setting their banter aside as she took her place at the head of the table.

“The attacks,” he replied just as seriously as he sat down in the chair to her immediate left. “I assume you’ve read the updated dispatch from Starfleet Command?”

“I have,” she confirmed. “At least, enough of it to understand why we’re building up our forces along the Romulan neutral zone.”

“Good. What you probably *don’t* know because it wasn’t addressed in the dispatch is that some in Starfleet Command’s inner circles have reason to believe the Romulans were working with someone inside the Federation...possibly even within Starfleet itself.”

“Oh, I can’t believe *that*, Jim,” Montoya protested. “Who could even consider such a thing? Starfleet personnel working with the Romulans to attack the Federation? Says who?”

“Federation Representative Robert Charles. He claims to have learned of it while the Romulans were holding him captive. I won’t get into all the details, but we do have evidence to support that claim.”

“All right,” she acquiesced. “Assuming it’s true, why did you need to meet with me? What’s *Alliance’s* involvement going forward?”

“None,” he told her plainly. “I’m investigating the matter for Admiral Nogura. I’m actually here to talk to...Colonel Finnegan.”

“I see.” Montoya pressed the ‘call’ button in the panel in front of her without missing a beat. “Bridge, Captain Montoya.”

“*Go ahead, Captain.*”

“Locate Colonel Finnegan and instruct him report to me in briefing room eight-A.”

“*Right away, Captain.*”

She closed the channel, then asked Kirk, “I don’t suppose you’d take the colonel and his boys and girls with you when you go?”

Kirk snickered. “I’ve been down that road already, Rachel,” he told her. Then he shook his head adamantly and added, “No, thank you.”

“Just thought I’d ask,” she told him, shrugging her shoulders. “What’s the colonel’s connection to your investigation, if I may ask you that?”

“I don’t honestly know that he has any,” Kirk admitted. “Admiral Nogura hinted that I should talk to him first, so that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Hinted, huh?” She sighed and shook her head. “Good ol’ Heihachiro Nogura. Never says anything straight out.”

“Oh, I’ve known him to tell it like it is once or twice,” Kirk quipped. Truth be told, he couldn’t remember a single time when Nogura *hadn’t* been straight forward and direct with him...about *anything*.

“I have to admit, Jim, much as I’d like to *not* spend any more time with our mutual MACO friend than I have to, I’m curious. Mind if I sit in while you talk to him?”

“Not at all,” he assured her. “Having an eyewitness present might just keep me from beating the tar out of him.”

“Either that or provide you someone to call in as backup,” she countered, smiling.

“Or that, yes,” Kirk agreed, smiling back.

Right on cue, the door slid aside and Colonel Finnegan walked in wearing his dark green shirt with the triple all-silver rank bands around the cuffs and his ever-present happy smirk on his face, but the first thing Kirk noticed was that he hadn't yet changed the logo on his chest. He was still wearing the shark swimming over the *Enterprise* insignia in silver with the MACOs' 'omega' symbol in its center. "Captain Montoya," he greeted his current host, "what can I do for..." He fell silent when his eyes fell on Kirk as the door closed behind him, and elation filled his tone. "Jimmy, me boyo!" he practically shouted with glee as he started to approach. "So good ta see yeh again! Ta what do I owe the pleasure this time?" Kirk stood up and Finnegan grabbed him by the shoulders as though he were truly excited to see him. "Did yeh really miss me so much yeh could no' stay away?"

"Hardly," Kirk replied as he reached up inside the colonel's arms and gently pushed them outward, freeing himself.

"Hardly?" Finnegan asked, feigning hurt as he dropped his hands to his sides. "Now what kind o' way is that to greet an old friend, Jimmy boy?"

"I'm here because I have no choice," Kirk told him. "I need to talk to you."

"And what exactly do yeh need to be talkin' ta me about?" he inquired.

Kirk gestured toward the chair beside him. "Have a seat, Colonel." He waited for Finnegan to sit down first, then sat back down himself.

"By the way, Jimmy, did yeh like the Boston Crème?"

"It tasted wonderful. Thank you," Kirk replied sarcastically. Then he dismissed all vestiges of their years-long conflict, humorous and otherwise, and told him, "Look, Sean, this is a deadly serious matter we need to discuss."

Finnegan apparently saw the truth of just how serious a matter it was in Kirk's eyes, as all traces of his perpetually humorous attitude quickly vanished from his expression and he asked, "What can I do for yeh, Jimmy?"

"Provide me with some valuable answers, I hope," Kirk replied.

"Well now, that does depend on the questions now, doesn' it?" the colonel pointed out. "Fire away."

"What do you know about the circumstances surrounding your recent assignment to the *Enterprise*?"

"The circumstances, yeh say? What's ta know? Starfleet Command wanted to assign a MACO unit to the *Enterprise*. Mine was assigned."

"Who assigned you?" Kirk prodded. "From where *exactly* did the order come? Give me a name."

"Admiral Nogura," Finnegan replied as though the answer should have been obvious.

"Nogura?" Kirk asked. He hadn't known what name or names to expect, but that one hadn't been among them. "Your assignment was *his* idea? He *personally* ordered you?"

"Aye, I told yeh that before, Jimmy, the day we arrived on yer ship. The whole thing was his recommendation, I told yeh. I got me orders straight from 'im, aye."

"So you did," Kirk acknowledged, remembering...and wondering how he could have forgotten in the first place. Had recent events really shaken him that much? "He's also the one who suggested I talk to you about this."

"Talk ta me about what, Jimmy?" Finnegan asked him curiously, sounding as though he were beginning to grow frustrated. "What the bloody hell is this all about?"

“When Nogura gave you your orders, did you happen to mention that you and I...”

“That we knew each other?” Finnegan asked, interrupting when Kirk hesitated. “That we hated each other to the core? That yeh used ta whine like a little girl about me teasin’ yeh back at the academy? Aye, I did.”

Kirk clenched his jaw for a moment, then asked, “And?”

“And what?”

“How did he respond to that?” Kirk asked him, beginning to grow impatient himself. “What did he say?”

“He said he already knew about that, but that he did no’ care. He did no’ give a blood-worm’s slimy ass if the two of us wanted ta kill each other. Tell yeh the truth, I kind o’ got the feelin’ he was glad ta hear it, if yeh want my honest opinion. Like he was *countin’* on it, maybe.” The colonel paused for a moment, obviously thinking back over the situation, then asked, “Yeh think he intentionally sabotaged the assignment? Even after he recommended it in the first place?”

“I do now,” Kirk answered. “The question is, why?”

“Yeh got me, Jimmy,” Finnegan replied, though the question had probably only been a rhetorical one. “You seem ta know more about what’s goin’ on here than I do.”

“You say Nogura *personally* issued you your orders?”

“Aye, he did,” Finnegan confirmed. “From his hand directly ta mine, standin’ right in front o’ me.”

“And he was already well aware of the past you and I share.”

Finnegan huffed. “How many times do I have ta tell yeh, Jimmy-boy?” he asked him, growing exasperated.

“Jim,” Montoya chimed in, drawing both men’s attention. Kirk, for one, had almost forgotten she was sitting there. “Admiral Nogura is one of the most straight-backed loyal-to-the-cause flag officers in Starfleet. His recommendation or not, why in the world would he of all people sabotage Command’s orders?”

“As I said, Rachel, that is the question,” Kirk reminded her. Then he considered her words for another moment or two, and added, “But you might have just answered it.”

“How so?” she inquired.

“As you just pointed out, Admiral Nogura *is* one of the most straight-backed loyal-to-the-cause flag officers in Starfleet. And Starfleet’s cause is the peaceful exploration of space. The MACOs are combat troops.” He turned his eyes briefly to the colonel and acknowledged, perhaps as a concession, “Yes, the MACOs exist with good cause. They serve a legitimate purpose and do so honorably, I agree.” He looked back at Montoya. “But they are primarily and essentially a military force. *Enterprise*, on the other hand, represents Starfleet’s *primary* purpose. That, again, being the peaceful exploration of space. And *that* is the cause to which Admiral Nogura is most loyal.”

“And stationing MACOs aboard the *Enterprise* represented a very real threat to that cause,” Montoya concluded.

“Exactly,” Kirk confirmed.

All three of them looked up at the alert indicator above the door as it suddenly began flashing red and an excited voice came over the ship-wide intercom, announcing, “*Red alert! Red alert! Captain to the bridge.*”

Kirk leapt to his feet and reached for the comm. button automatically, but stopped himself before he pressed it. Montoya, on the other hand, pressed hers without hesitation. "Montoya to bridge," she called. "Report."

"*A Klingon battlecruiser just appeared across the border, Captain,*" the voice advised her. "*Their weapons are charged and they've raised their shields!*"

She joined Kirk on her feet, and Finnegan quickly followed suit. "All hands to battle stations," she ordered. "Arm all weapons and raise shields. Notify Starfleet Command that Klingon forces have crossed back into the neutral zone again. I'm on my way." She closed the channel and led the way toward the door.

"Sounds like yeh'd better have a talk with Admiral Nogura, Jimmy," Finnegan said as the door slid open ahead of them.

"I intend to, Colonel," Kirk replied as they rushed out. "Believe me."

Montoya, Kirk, and Finnegan surged in through the starboard doors onto the bridge. Unlike those of most every other class of Federation starship, this vessel's bridge did not sit atop the saucer-like primary hull. Rather, it was buried deep in the center of deck-7 where it was far less vulnerable to enemy attack, which made a certain amount of good sense, Kirk thought. Especially for a vessel whose immediate secondary function was combat. Montoya headed straight for the center seat while Kirk and Finnegan both stopped on the upper deck, and Kirk, having never stood on the bridge of a dreadnought before, took the opportunity to look around and compare it with that of his own ship.

It was roughly the same size, though the stations that made up the outer ring seemed to protrude from the bulkheads that made up the outer circumference rather than form it, and the center seat and helm/nav console sat back toward aft rather than in the center. The science station was centered in back between the twin sets of doors, much like that on *Endeavour's* bridge sat between its twin turbolifts, and like that newest heavy cruiser, a separate weapons station sat on the portside, facing the main screen rather than outward. The color scheme was the same as that of the *Enterprise* with one exception. The turbolift doors, helm/nav console panels, and safety railings that were a bright orange-red on the *Enterprise* were a much more subdued and deeper burgundy here.

"Report," Montoya had ordered before she'd sat down.

"*Enterprise* has gone to red alert," the science officer chimed in first from her station to Kirk's immediate left. "Shields up and weapons ready."

"One *K'tinga*-class battlecruiser holding station just across neutral zone border," the helmsman added. "Shields up and weapons hot."

"Have they hailed us?" Montoya asked her communications officer.

"Not so far, Captain," he replied.

"Open a channel."

"Aye, Captain." His fingers danced over his console. "Channel open."

"Klingon battlecruiser, this is Captain Rachel Montoya commanding the Federation dreadnought *Alliance*. Please respond and state your intentions."

The image of the *K'tinga*-class battlecruiser wavered. "*Captain Montoya...*" a voice replied over the bridge's main speakers before its source's image appeared on the screen—a

voice that Kirk was all too familiar with and recognized immediately. And then its source did appear, sneering at them from his place in the throne-like center seat of his bridge. Warlord Kargh, in full warlord uniform and armor, his wife Le'ak standing close by his right side. "*How nice to see you again.*"

"Kargh," Kirk muttered under his breath as he stared at the image.

"*That is Warlord Kargh to you, Kirk,*" the Klingon reminded him, his tone sounding like a rather poorly veiled threat.

"I'll try to remember that," Kirk told him, somewhat facetiously. Then he looked to Montoya, who was already staring back at him, and asked, "May I, Captain?"

"By all means, Captain," she enthusiastically replied.

Kirk raised his eyes back to Kargh's image and told him, "I didn't expect to see you again so soon, *Warlord Kargh.*"

"*Your mistake, Kirk,*" Kargh replied.

"Maybe so, but we averted the war," Kirk reminded him. "Starfleet has withdrawn its forces. You have no cause to be patrolling inside the neutral zone."

"*Starfleet has withdrawn most of its forces,*" Kargh snapped angrily. "*Your warships Federation...*" Kargh sniggered at the name. "*...and Alliance remain on our border, and now your accursed Enterprise returns to join them. Why?*"

"Federation business," Kirk replied snidely. "Our assignment has nothing to do with the Klingon Empire. And by the way, it's not *your* border. It's the neutral zone border."

"*As you say, Kirk, we averted the escalation of the war,*" Kargh said, ignoring Kirk's correction, even as he offered the one of his own. "*No increase of hostilities currently exist between our governments. So what business could the Federation have here now, so close to our border?*"

"We're on *our* side of the *neutral zone* border, Kargh," Kirk pointed out, refusing to refer to it in any other way. "Speaking of which... Why *have* you violated the zone again? Why are you threatening the tenuous peace we've managed to establish?"

"*I am carrying out my first act as Warlord, Kirk. What was the neutral zone is now a part of the Klingon Empire. The border that lies between us now separates Federation space from sovereign Klingon territory. Should any Federation vessel cross it, even in error, we shall destroy it immediately, as the Emperor ordered.*"

"That neutral zone was established by lawful treaty years ago, Kargh," Kirk reminded him. "Seizing military control over it *could* be construed as another act of war. You told me you didn't want war."

"*I told you I did not want that war—Malkthon's war.*" He turned his head aside, away from Le'ak, and spat at his deck as though uttering the name had left a bad taste in his mouth. Then he looked back at Kirk and added, "*I also told you that when we next met, I would have a fleet at my back.*" He lifted his hands from the arms of his throne-like chair and turned his palms up as if to perform a miracle. "*Behold, my fleet.*"

The image of the *Dark Destroyer* replaced that of Kargh, and seconds later more than a dozen Klingon warships—two more *K'Tinga*-class, four D-7s, and several birds-of-prey—decloaked behind it.

CHAPTER 3

"I really, *really* do not like these odds, Jim," Captain Montoya said, shaking her head slowly back and forth while she stared worriedly up at the image of the Klingon fleet on the main viewscreen. Some of her crew threw surprised looks in her direction at her casual use of his first name—perhaps they weren't aware that he was a friend of their captain's, or maybe using first names wasn't a normal practice aboard her ship. Either way, it wasn't important and Kirk let it go.

"Don't worry about it," he replied, staring up at that same ominous image. As if two squadrons of Klingon battlecruisers with at least that many birds-of-prey backing them up weren't something that every starship commander in his or her right mind wouldn't worry about. That drew more than a few surprised glances as well. "I've crossed paths with Kargh several times before. I know him. If he were going to attack, he would have done so by now." He dropped his gaze to her. "He's just rattling his saber...or...his *bat'leth*, or...whatever."

Montoya turned her chair and looked up at him. "I hope you're right, Jim," she said, "because *Alliance* is a dreadnought, not a berserker, and even if I called Starfleet Command for help right now, it would never get here in time to do us any good."

"I know. I've talked him down before. I can do it again," Kirk assured her.

"Talked him down?" she asked, obviously skeptical. "You're going to 'talk down' the warlord of the Klingon fleet?"

"I'm sure going to try."

"Didn't you try that not long before you encountered the *Copernicus*?"

That was a low blow and Kirk reeled slightly, but he realized immediately that it was also a fair question. Rachel had asked out of concern for her ship and her crew, as any good starship commander would have. "That was different," he told her. "We were virtually at war then. Border skirmishes had been breaking out all over the place. We're not shooting at each other anymore. We're at peace now." He paused for a moment, in a tone of voice that made it clear he was asking for permission—he was aboard *her* ship after all—he said, "At least give me a chance to talk to him, Captain."

Montoya drew a deep breath and thought it over as she slowly exhaled, then said, "By all means, please, start talking."

"Thank you, Captain." Kirk turned to the communications officer and nodded.

The comm. officer flipped a single switch. "Audio resumed, sir," he informed Kirk.

"Thank you," Kirk replied. Then he looked back up at the viewscreen and called out, "Kargh, are you still there? I'm curious about something."

For the next several moments nothing happened and Kirk began to wonder if Kargh had decided to ignore all further attempts at communication, now that he had amassed such a large force. Then, thankfully, the image on the screen wavered once more and Kargh's visage reappeared. "*I am here, Kirk,*" the enemy warlord replied, "*as is a small part of my fleet, as you have seen. But I do not wish to discuss your curiosities, abundant though they may be.*"

Despite their differences, Kirk couldn't help but grin at Kargh's joke, even while he wondered if it had been intentional, and he turned his head to one side to hide it.

"*I grow weary of all this talk.*"

“Bear with me for a moment, Kargh, please,” Kirk requested, wiping the grin from his face and locking eyes with his Klingon nemesis once more as he raised a hand to stop him from closing the channel. “Back on Kronos you told me that you didn’t expect the *Enterprise* to be chosen to work with K’Sia. Why?”

“It is pronounced ‘Qo’noS,’ Kirk, and it was no secret to us that your Enterprise was already occupied chasing Romulans.”

“That’s right, Kargh,” Kirk quickly and adamantly confirmed, taking a couple of steps forward and seizing on the opportunity to steer their conversation where he’d wanted it to go. “We *were* occupied chasing Romulans. Romulans who took part in a cowardly sneak attack against Federation worlds populated by non-combatant civilians. Romulans who slaughtered more than three and a half million innocent Federation citizens. Romulans who pretended to be Klingon warriors in an even more cowardly attempt to shift the blame and the dishonor of those attacks to your empire.”

“So your government has claimed, Earther.”

“It’s not just a claim, Kargh. It’s the truth and you know it,” Kirk pressed. “You’re the Klingon warlord. You’ve seen the evidence yourself.”

“I have seen records of your so-called evidence,” Kargh countered. “Copies. Copies of deep space surveillance footage that show Romulan D-seven battlecruisers and old Earther starships carrying out the attacks.”

“Romulan D-sevens with no birds painted on their hulls, Kargh,” Kirk pointed out to him. “Romulan D-sevens bearing *Klingon* markings.”

“Those records could easily have been altered, or even forged entirely.”

“You’re reaching, Kargh,” Kirk accused, “and I think you know it. The records were *not* altered and they’re *not* forgeries. Your own Kitumba has had the opportunity to examine the evidence as well. He has seen everything we have and he believes we provided you with the unaltered truth, and he’s right. That’s why he ordered your forces to pull back from the border rather than invade.”

Kargh sneered and raised his voice, just a little bit. “*Now you lie, Kirk!*” he accused in return. “*You were there! You know that is not why he called off the invasion! He called it off because he saw Malkthon’s treachery!*”

“Perhaps initially,” Kirk admitted, giving ground. “But later, after he examined our evidence...”

“What is the point of all this, Kirk?” Kargh asked, interrupting.

Kirk drew a deep breath and sighed. The time had come to show his cards. “You and I know one another, Kargh. We’ve met face-to-face, ship-to-ship, on the field of battle. But we have also worked *together*, side-by-side, most recently down on the surface your own home world. You’ve learned things about me and I’ve learned things about you. I know you to be an honorable warrior, and I know that above all else you care deeply about the honor of your empire.” Kirk paused briefly to try to read his enemy’s face. As best he could tell, Kargh was listening to him—*really* listening. “The vessel aboard which I now stand has received orders to withdraw from this area,” he continued. “The *Enterprise* has received new orders as well. Withdraw your forces from the border, Kargh. Leave us to pursue and capture those cowards who dishonored your empire and tried to plunge you into a war that you didn’t want.”

Kargh appeared to consider his options for the next several moments, hearing Le’ak’s

words as she spoke into his ear—Kirk couldn't help but wonder what she might have been telling him. Then, finally, he responded, *"Very well, Kirk. As I have told you before, you speak to my ego and I like that. I shall withdraw my forces...for now. Pursue your prey, but do not dare cross the border into Klingon space as you do so. And be warned. Whenever you approach, we shall be near."* Kargh's image wavered and the view of his fleet returned. Then, after a few seconds, the enemy vessels began to cloak.

"Klingon fleet withdrawing, Captain...I think," the tactical officer reported.

"Stand down red alert," Montoya ordered. "Maintain yellow alert until their fleet has withdrawn from the area." Then she turned to Kirk once more and said, "That was a hell of a speech, Jim. Thank you."

"I've had years of practice," Kirk kidded in reply. "And now I have to get back to the *Enterprise*. It's time I had a heart-to-heart talk with Admiral Nogura."

* * * * *

She was not cold at all. If anything, she felt too warm. Nonetheless, former Imperial Commander Dion Charvon lay shivering slightly in the fetal position on her small bunk's thin mattress, facing the wall against which it sat, wishing that at the very least her captors would provide her with blankets. They had fed her next to nothing. They had not allowed her to bathe—they barely gave her enough drinking water to stave off dehydration. Nor had they provided her with a change of clothes, despite the fact that the underpants and shift they had so far allowed her to continue wearing were torn in places and tattered and stained with sweat from her interrogation sessions. She had, however, inadvertently been given an opportunity to catch a quick glimpse of herself in the smooth metal surface of the seatback just prior to her last session. The physical abuse that she had been subjected to and the neglect that she had faced between sessions had clearly shown. Her hair was disheveled and matted, she had dark circles under eyes, her cheekbones were both bruised and a little swollen, and she looked like she had lost a significant amount of weight. Unable to fall asleep despite being so totally exhausted, she had to wonder how much longer she might be able to last, and at the same time didn't think she could take much more.

How many sessions had she already endured? Four? Six? Ten? She really had no idea anymore. She had lost count at some point...somewhere along the way.

She heard footsteps approaching from up the corridor—two sets, wearing hard-soled boots—a sound she had quickly grown to recognize. Correctional guards. She closed her eyes tightly and prayed to whatever deities might not have already abandoned her to her fate that they would continue past her cell this time and move on to someone else's. She listened carefully as the footsteps grew louder...and her heart sank when they stopped. She heard the sound of the energy barrier that held her inside her closet-sized cell powering down, and then the hum of the twin energy emitter bars as they receded into the wall. The guards were coming for her...again.

She rolled onto her back and looked just in time to see the guards charge into her cell and rush toward her. "No!" she shouted, throwing her arms up in front of her instinctively as though that might somehow hold them off. They grabbed her arms and she tried to struggle

against them as they twisted them around behind her, trying to roll her onto her stomach. She kicked out at their sides, their guts, even their heads, though she couldn't quite reach them, probably hurting herself more than she was hurting them as she resisted with every ounce of whatever strength she had left within her. "Leave me alone!" she screamed, trying to make it sound like an order. "I have nothing more to say!" Somewhere in her mind, a still small voice told her that her actions were undignified, but she knew that she could not worry about such things now.

The guards finally found all the leverage they needed and flipped her over onto her stomach. "No!" she shouted once more when they twisted her arms up behind her. "Damn you!" she screamed when they then pinned her arms to her back and snapped the restraints in place around her wrists. "I have already told the interrogator all that I know," she complained when her eyes began to tear as she surrendered to the futility of her efforts. "I have nothing more to say!" She blinked back the tears as the guards grabbed her by the arms once more and lifted her up off of the bunk. Tears were a sign of weakness. She would show no such sign. "He is wasting his time!" she insisted as they stood her up on her feet and held her tightly between them by her arms. "I have already told him everything!"

They pulled her along between them, out of her cell and up the long corridor. "This is pointless!" she insisted, her bruised and weakened legs barely able to keep her on her feet, they were pulling her along so quickly. "I have nothing more to... Wait!" She looked first at one guard and then at the other. Where were they taking her? They were taking her the wrong way! "Where are we going?" she asked them more calmly. But that calm vanished as quickly as it had shown itself. "The interrogation room is back that way!" she shouted. Neither one of them said a word in reply. They refused even to look at her, and she suddenly found herself growing very, *very* frightened. "Where are you taking me?" she asked again more urgently as she grew more frightened. "*Where are you taking me?*" she screamed. "*Where are you...*"

She took the blow across the left side of her face and it left her stunned. She hadn't even seen it coming. Then, as she shook her head briefly and vigorously and blinked her eyes to shake off the effects, the guards turned and stopped in front of a closed and unmarked door just as it began to open. "What is this?" she asked them as the little points of light dancing before her eyes began to fade. Once again, neither one of them answered, but the door opened to reveal what appeared to be a second interrogation chamber filled with shiny new devices, most of which Charvon did not recognize. Standing beside a large metal-framed chair that she very much *did* recognize, a tall man dressed all in black turned to face her. He was a large man, tall and muscular, and he wore a very mean and scary—no, a *sadistic* expression on his oddly skeletal and quite frightening face.

"*Jolan tru*, Dion Charvon of the House Charvanek," the man greeted her.

"Who are you?" she asked him in return, hoping that the fear she was experiencing on the inside hadn't found its way to her voice.

"I am your new interrogator," he replied. The he stepped off to one side and gestured toward the chair—the chair—beside him. "Strap her in," he told the guards.

"I already told the other interrogator what happened!" she informed the man as the guards pulled her forward toward the chair. "I told him everything!" She turned her eyes to the chair. It was different than the first one—bigger, with more attachments. Worse. "*No!*"

She struggled for all she was worth, but the guards were simply too much for her.

They lifted her up off of her feet and practically threw her into the chair, then pulled a pair of straps across her lap and her waist and locked them into place. They strapped her ankles down as well, one on each side of the wide footrest, then leaned her forward, removed her restraints, and strapped her wrists down on the chair's low arms. Next they pulled a strap around her forehead and pulled it tight enough that she could barely turn her head, let alone lift it forward off of the back of the chair. Finally, they attached a cup-like device to the seat directly between her thighs and then opened a hole in the center of the seat beneath her. With all of that done, they backed off and positioned themselves by the door, out of the way.

"The guard between your legs and the hole beneath you are just precautionary," the interrogator told her as he swung a control panel out and up into place and powered it up, "in case you lose control of your bodily functions during our conversation."

She glared up at him, her heart filled with hatred. The chair in the other chamber had not had those features. This promised to be the worst session yet. "I have nothing more to say," she told him once more, hoping that she looked as brave and determined as she was trying to sound.

"I do have some good news for you, Dion, before we begin," the interrogator told her, standing behind the panel with his hands behind his back, looking down at her and wearing a frighteningly pleasant smile on his face. "The results of your latest medical examination have been uploaded. I need not waste time obtaining a baseline reading of your vital signs, so we may begin your enhanced interrogation without delay and finish it that much sooner." His smile vanished. "If you cooperate with me, of course. You *will* confess to collaborating with the enemy Federation, and to delivering to their agents our cloaking device."

"I did *not* collaborate with Federation agents!" she insisted. "They *stole* the device!"

"Hm. Perhaps we will not finish any sooner after all. Either way, you will confess," he repeated, "and you will tell me every secret that you revealed to our enemies while in their custody."

"I revealed no secrets!" she shouted. "You must believe me!"

"My job is not to believe you," he told her frankly. "My job is to break you. My job is to obtain your confession." He looked over at the guards. "You are dismissed."

The guards saluted fist-to-chest and then turned and marched out of the room. The interrogator watched them go, watched the door close and lock behind them, and then turned his eyes to Charvon once more and drew a fleet-issue dagger from his belt. Seeing its shiny silver blade flash with reflected light, she swallowed hard, though her throat's severe dryness made that difficult enough that she nearly choked.

He leaned in and held the dagger close so that its point hovered right in front of her eyes. "You will tell me everything I want to know, Dion Charvon of the House of Charvanek, even if you do not open your mouth." He grabbed the front of her shift and lifted it away from her chest. "Space vessels are not the only thing we obtained from the Klingons during our brief alliance. Their mind-sifter technology, for example."

"I did not collaborate with the enemy," she told him once more as he cut her shift's left shoulder strap. "I did not reveal any secrets to the enemy," she continued as he cut the right strap as well. "I have already explained everything to the other interrogating officer!" The interrogator slipped his blade inside the top of her shift and slowly pulled it downward, slicing the garment open along its entire length. Then he grabbed hold of it, pulled it off of

her and out from behind her and tossed it to the floor. “If there were anything more to tell, I would have told him already!” she insisted. He grasped the front of her underpants and pulled them away from her waist. “There is nothing more to tell!” she screamed as he cut through the left hip.

“We shall see,” he replied as he cut through the right.

“I *swear* to you!”

He pulled the last of her clothing away and discarded it, then looked her in the eye and told her, “I know you do.”

“You *will* regret subjecting me to this humiliation,” she warned him as the hum of a small motor drew her eyes up toward the ceiling, from where a device about the size of a backpack with eight long metallic arms, each ending with some kind of unique instrument, was descending toward her like a giant metal spider hanging from a stand of web.

“That is what all of my subjects tell me,” he replied.

“I am a commander in the Praetor’s fleet!” she shouted.

“You *were* a commander in the Praetor’s fleet,” he calmly corrected her. “Now you are a plaything, assigned to me for my amusement.”

If glares were beam weapons, hers would have burned holes through his skull. “I will see you executed for this!” she warned him.

“Perhaps,” he allowed. “But first you will have to *survive* this.” He paused for one brief moment to let that sink in, then asked her, “Shall we begin?”

* * * * *

Tal approached General Varnek’s office, back in uniform with his commander’s rank insignia in place, more than a little displeased that a pair of armed guards had been assigned to accompany him there, one on either side. “You will wait outside, in the corridor,” he told the one on his left, a sub-lieutenant, when they stopped in front of the general’s door.

“If that is what the general orders, Commander,” the sub-lieutenant replied.

“I do not care if *he* orders it or not,” Tal informed him angrily. “*I* am ordering it now. You *will* wait outside!”

The sub-lieutenant glared at Tal, staring directly into his eyes as he pressed the buzzer beside the door.

“*Yes?*” Varnek responded.

“We have brought *Commander* Tal as ordered, General,” the sub-lieutenant informed him. “He *humbly requests* that the uhlan and I wait out here in the corridor.”

“*Enter.*”

The sub-lieutenant opened the door. Then he and his partner, the uhlan, each put a hand on the back of Tal’s shoulders, nudged him forward into the general’s office, and then followed as the general stood up behind his desk.

“I told you to wait in the corridor,” Tal told the sub-lieutenant, though he didn’t bark at him the way he had previously.

“General?” the sub-lieutenant asked, seeking confirmation.

“In the corridor,” Varnek told him with a nod.

Tal saluted the general fist-to-chest as the sub-lieutenant glared at him once more and then led his partner back out into the corridor. "That sub-lieutenant needs a strong lesson in following the orders of his superiors, General," he said when the door closed behind him.

"They are my *personal* guard, Commander," Varnek informed him as he returned his subordinate's salute with a less precise one of his own. Then he sat back down and added, "They have sworn an oath to follow *my* orders alone, second only to the Praetor himself." He gestured toward the visitor chair beside his desk. "Take a seat, Commander."

"I think not," Tal replied, folding his arms across his chest in daring defiance. "You had me confined, General. I want to know why."

"Why?" the general asked. "Because you failed."

"Failed?" Tal blurted out, both surprised and angry. "I did not fail! My troops killed *thousands* over Tellar Prime and Andoria and Vulcan! They killed *millions* at Babel! Four Federation starships, destroyed! Including one of their mighty dreadnoughts!"

Varnek slowly rose to his feet once more, leaned forward, clenched fists on his desk, and glared at his arrogant subordinate. "All for which the *Klingons* were supposed to bear the responsibility!" he scolded...loudly. "The *Klingons* were to be blamed for the attacks!" He straightened. "And you were not ordered to attack Babel! You were to attack *Earth* directly!"

"The opportunity to..."

"Opportunity be damned!" Varnek shouted furiously. "Had you attacked the Terran home world when you were *supposed* to do so, perhaps you would not have suffered such a miserable defeat when you finally did so later! I should have you stripped and thrown back into confinement! *No!* I should have you *executed!*"

"Why do you not?" Tal asked him, his tone challenging.

Varnek turned his back and stepped away, approached the window off to the side behind his desk. "Why do I not?"

"That is what I asked, General."

"Because I still need you and your...new agency," Varnek answered truthfully, gazing out over the base's southwest segment. "I am General of Imperial Intelligence, but you alone command this 'Tal-Shiar' that you have created, and your agents seem to be as loyal to you as my personal guards are to me." He looked back over his shoulder at Tal. "And because the Praetor himself approved your target of opportunity."

"Did he?" Tal asked, feeling suddenly exonerated as well as a little surprised, though pleasantly so, as Varnek stepped back over to his desk. "Then it seems you acted prematurely in having me confined."

"Not so, Commander," Varnek assured him. "After all, your invasion of Earth *was* a total failure. Not only did your forces fail to destroy a single city, they couldn't even manage to destroy a single defending vessel. You should be stripped of your rank and locked away for that embarrassment alone."

"You said you still need me, General," Tal reminded him. "Why?"

"Sit down, Commander." The general took his own seat behind his desk again, but when he looked up again, Tal was still standing. "That was not a request."

"Very well," Tal replied after a moment. He stepped around in front of the chair and sat down, then said. "I am seated, General. Now, what do you still require of the Tal-Shiar?"

"The unfortunate consequence of your failure is that hostilities between the Klingon

Empire and the Federation have come to an end,” Varnek told him. “The newfound peace between them threatens the security of our star empire. I want you to destabilize that peace. I want you to bring that peace to an abrupt end.”

“Any competent commander in the fleet could develop three plans to do that in a day, General,” Tal pointed out. “What task do you *really* need my agency to carry out for you?” Varnek gazed at him as though he were trying to decide whether or not to trust him. “Well, General?” Tal prompted him impatiently.

“You replaced the Vulcan Ambassador to the Federation Council with a lookalike,” Varnek finally replied. “The Terrans now hold your agent prisoner. I want you to retrieve him before they force him to talk.”

Tal actually smirked. “I can assure you, General, my agent will never *talk*. He will die first, willingly...by his own hand if necessary.”

“Are you prepared to lose such a highly-trained agent so easily, without even *trying* to get him back?”

Tal drew a breath to answer, but then stopped for a moment to think about that. The general had a point. Bearing a striking resemblance to the Federation’s Vulcan Ambassador was certainly not that agent’s only valuable asset—his ability to mimic the ambassador so well not his only skill. To allow the Federation to hold him indefinitely without even trying to retrieve him would indeed be a great disservice to the Praetor. “Do we know where they are holding him?” Tal finally inquired.

“With Babel destroyed, the Federation moved its conference to a world they identify as ‘Parliament,’ Varnek told him. “It was there, during the conference, that they found your man out and arrested him. That remains his last known location.”

“Do we know where this ‘Parliament’ is?”

“Indeed we do, Commander,” Varnek replied, seemingly very pleased with himself. “I will have its coordinates uploaded to your vessel. You *will* submit your rescue plan to me for approval, *before* you break orbit. Do you understand, Commander?”

“I do, General.” Tal stood up and saluted once more. “And now if you will excuse me, General.” He dropped his salute and turned and approached the door, but then stopped suddenly at Varnek’s next words.

“You did not ask after the status of your former commander.”

“She usurped my command, killed my loyal agents, and then threw me into the brig,” Tal told the general without looking back.

“You were loyal to her once.”

“She was worthy of my loyalty once. As worthy of my loyalty as my own sister, the senator.” *Sister*, Tal repeated in his mind. *Of course*. He turned back around and looked the general in the eye and asked, “What *is* my former commander’s status, General?”

“I ordered her arrested and confined,” Varnek replied.

“On what charges exactly?”

“Espionage and treason, amongst some other, lesser charges. Why do you now ask, Commander? Do you wish to enter testimony on her behalf?”

“No.” Tal took a step back toward Varnek’s desk, then asked, “May I assume that she has not yet been executed?”

“You may.” Varnek stood up, walked around his desk, and approached Tal. “But she

likely will be, and very soon.”

“What has been done to her so far?”

“She has been debriefed and is currently undergoing...*enhanced* interrogation,” the general replied as he stopped in front of him.

Tal thought for a moment, then asked, “Would allowing her to live be worth getting my agent back to you, General? Would it be worth destabilizing and perhaps even destroying this newly established peace between the Federation and the Klingon Empire?”

“I suppose it would be,” Varnek replied. “Why?”

“Then prepare to allow her to live, General,” Tal said. Then he started to turn away once more, but Varnek grabbed him by the arm and stopped him.

“Just a moment, Commander,” he said. Then he released the man’s arm. “If I am to even consider allowing a traitor to live, I must know why?”

“She has a younger sister, General,” Tal told him.

“Many of us have younger sisters, Commander. What of it?”

“Yes, General. However...” He turned and headed toward the door once more, leaving Varnek speechless behind him. “...*her* younger sister works for me.”

* * * * *

Dion Charvon clenched her jaw—not that she could *not* do so—as every muscle in her weary body tensed to the point where she once more feared that some of them they might tear. She convulsed in agony as though she were being electrocuted. She started foaming at the mouth and felt her saliva running down over her chin, and could not do anything to stop it. Finally unable to hold back any longer, she felt herself lose control of her bladder, though with having had so little water to drink she was pretty sure it was not holding very much fluid anyway. At least she had been spared the embarrassment of passing anything more...so far.

The interrogator slapped her hard across the left side of her face. How many times he had done that already, she could not guess. “You were *not* defeated!” he shouted into her left ear. Then he slapped her again. “You collaborated with the enemy! You *allowed* them to take the cloaking device!” He slapped her again. “Confess!”

“*Noooo!*” she somehow managed to force past her grinding teeth at the same time that she thought she heard the incoming communications tone sound on the controls console.

The interrogator moved behind her, then reappeared on her right and slapped that side of her face. “You *gave* the cloaking device to the enemy willingly!” he then shouted into her right ear as he clipped his earpiece over his own. He slapped her again. “Confess!”

“*I...did...NOT!*” she screamed.

She heard the tone again...or thought she did.

The interrogator leaned down close to her ear and told her, speaking very softly, “It has become apparent to me that no amount of physical duress is going to make you confess to your crimes, Dion Charvon of House Charvanek. My compliments on your strength of will. Unfortunately, I must now resort to more...permanently damaging methods.”

She heard the tone again. She was sure of it.

“The Klingon mind-sifter has proven itself to be very useful,” he told her. “With the

levels of resistance you have shown yourself capable of putting forth, I expect it will leave you as little more than an empty shell of flesh by the time we finish. Perhaps I will have you stuffed and mounted as a trophy afterwards.”

She heard the tone again.

The interrogator stepped back behind the controls, hesitated for a moment, and then cut the power to the chair, finally allowing her muscles to relax. Then he tapped his earpiece. “Yes?” he answered as Charvon started taking long, slow deep breaths. Then he said, “Yes, General, she lives.” He listened for a few more moments, then acknowledged, “Understood, General.” He pulled the earpiece from his ear and set it down on the console, then pressed a button. “Guards.”

She heard the door open, then heard the guards step back inside. “Release her from the chair,” the interrogator told them.

The guards stepped forward to comply. The interrogator stood by and watched, hands folded behind his back, while they unfastened her straps, starting with the one around her head. She turned her eyes to the interrogator and began to study his visage—every angle, every crease, every nuance of his skin tone. She would make him pay one day for what he had done to her.

“You are a uniquely fortunate woman, Dion Charvon of House Charvanek,” he told her, sounding genuinely disappointed. “The general, for reasons of which he has chosen not to inform me, has granted you a reprieve. A temporary one, at least.” He nodded to the guards. They grabbed her by the arms, lifted her up out of the chair and stood her up, then stood holding her between them, facing him. He looked her up and down, then sniffed and made a face.

“Her odor is repugnant,” he said. “Hose her down, then take her back to her cell.”

“Should we give her something to wear?” one of them asked.

“I will leave that up to you.”

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Tal awoke just before dawn and prepared himself for a long day. After breakfast he donned an ordinary gray business suit that he felt sure would not draw any undue attention out in the civilian segments of the city. Then he strolled across the base and requisitioned an unmarked sedan from the ground-vehicle fleet—one that looked just like any of a thousand others—and drove into the city's Ra'Hein Residential Segment. Ra'Hein was a well-to-do segment containing a variety of small but exclusive shops, large marketplaces, and elaborate recreational facilities, some of which were secretly government-owned, and several dozen high-rise apartment complexes. One of those complexes, a block of four identical high-rises, was also secretly government-owned—specifically by Imperial Intelligence. Three of those buildings contained apartments that were available to anyone who could afford to live there—Imperial Intelligence used the money to fund some of its operations—but the fourth, Tower #3, secretly housed military personnel whose connections to the military, for whatever reasons, were better kept secret.

That complex was Tal's destination, and traffic was even lighter than he had expected at that hour so he reached it far more quickly than he had thought he would. No matter. The sooner he gave the young officer her orders, the sooner she could get on with her assignment. He pulled into the multi-level parking structure that connected the four identical high-rises and drove up to its top level, then pulled into a parking slot facing the tower ahead and to his right, the one with the sign mounted above its entrance that read "Tower #3" in large, easy-to-read blue-green block letters. He turned off the motor and climbed out of the sedan, looked around at a number of the others that were parked on that level, especially those closest to him, and then started walking toward Tower #3.

D'Vahn Charvon lay sleeping soundly with her blankets pulled up over her chest and tucked in under her bare arms, her small but nicely furnished bedroom only dimly illuminated by what little heavily filtered early morning sunlight shone in through her window's darkly-tinted one-way ballistic glass. Nevertheless, it only took a single sounding of her apartment's door chime to wake her up. She'd been trained and conditioned to sleep soundly but lightly, and by the time it sounded a second time she had already propped herself up on her elbows and was peering through slowly opening eyes toward her closed bedroom door. *Finally*, she thought. *I have only been cooped up here waiting for weeks.*

She tossed her blankets aside, threw her feet out over the side of her bed and sat up, then looked over at the clock on her nightstand. *But why so early?* The chime sounded a third time as she stood up and straightened her short white nightshirt. *Sometime after lunch would have been preferable.* She stepped over to the door, took her robe down off of its hook, and pulled it on. *Still, this is better than having to wait yet another day.*

She keyed open the door and then closed and tied off her robe as she padded barefoot across the living room, which she noted was only just slightly brighter than her bedroom. The timer had not yet depolarized the windows for the day. The chime sounded a fourth time and she finally hollered with annoyance, "All right, I am coming!" Then she pressed the button to

activate the security monitor and was quite surprised when the screen in the wall beside the door lit up with the image of Commander Tal himself standing on the other side. She opened the door quickly and greeted him, "Commander Tal, sir."

"Sub-Lieutenant Charvon," he returned as he looked her over. A young woman in her mid-20s from a family of breeding, most people found D'Vahn to be stunningly beautiful with her long shiny red-brown hair, deep crystal-blue eyes, and flawless complexion, all of which Commander Tal had convinced her made her a valuable asset to the Tal-Shiar when he recruited her out of the fleet academy. In what particular context he had meant that, she could not be sure, but she was proud to serve the empire in whatever capacity she could best do so. "Forgive me for coming to you so early in the morning."

She stepped back and waved him in. "You have done nothing requiring forgiveness, sir," she told him. "Please, come in."

"Thank you."

"I must admit that I am surprised you have come personally, sir," she told him as she watched him walk past her and then pressed the button to close the door. "I have been here for weeks, standing by, awaiting my orders," she added, regretting her words even as they flowed from her mouth. He would, of course, already know that.

"I *have* orders for you, Sub-lieutenant," he replied, looking back at her, stone-faced.

"What I meant, sir," she explained as she followed him over to the center of the room, "was that I expected you would send a subordinate to deliver them—a courier or perhaps a junior officer." She gestured toward one of the easy chairs that sat catty-corner from the ends of her couch, both of which faced opposite short sides of her low table. "Please, Commander, have a seat," she invited him. "Would you like anything to eat or to drink?"

"No," he replied as he sat down.

She took a seat on the side of her couch closest to him, and when he didn't start right in, she asked him, "You say you have orders for me, Commander?"

"I do," he replied. "Secret orders. Your mission is an extremely sensitive one. That is why I came to deliver them myself. But there is something I need to tell you first." He paused briefly, then decided not to waste any more time and informed her, "Your sister, *Commander Charvon*, has returned to the empire."

"Dion!" D'Vahn shouted wide-eyed with excitement as she jumped to her feet. "My sister has escaped her captivity and made her way home?"

Tal shook his head and explained, "No. The Terrans released her willingly."

Her excitement faded to make room for confusion. "They released her?" she asked. She turned her back on her commander and took a few steps away. "But...the Terrans are known to *torture* and sometimes even *murder* their prisoners," she said as much to herself as to him. "Why would they suddenly release her?"

"That is a very good question, Sub-lieutenant," Tal pointed out. Then he said, "On the surface, she was returned to us as part of a two-way prisoner exchange."

D'Vahn looked back over her shoulder at him and said, "'On the surface,' you say." Then she asked, "So you believe there is more to it than that, Commander? You believe the Terrans have some hidden agenda?"

"Potentially," he replied. "There is the possibility that the Terrans have turned her and sent her back to us as a spy."

D’Vahn whirled around and faced him straight on. “A spy!” she shouted. “Dion? An agent for the enemy? Surely you do not believe that!” She took a step closer to him. “Where is she? I want to see her!”

“She has been arrested.”

“Arrested!” Tal looked up at her, his eyes narrow—an unvoiced warning for her to get a hold of herself. She read that warning easily enough and sat back down on the couch, then asked in a calmer tone of voice, “Why, Commander? Why has my sister been arrested?”

“The charges are collaboration with the enemy, espionage, and treason. She has been imprisoned and is being...interrogated.”

“Interrogated!” she burst out, reigning her emotions back in immediately when he glared at her once more. “Sir, Dion would *never* turn her back on the empire! And she will *never* confess to crimes that she did not commit! She will not survive interrogation!”

“I am pleased to be able to inform you that she *did* survive it, D’Vahn,” Tal reassured her. Then, just for good measure...and for whatever additional leverage it might give him, he added, “and I had General Varnek put a stop to it immediately.”

“You did? How?” she asked him. “And...why, if she is facing such serious charges?”

“Because although she and I now find ourselves at odds with one another, I do not for a moment believe she is a traitor. I served under her for a time, and although I am aware that she has her weaknesses as a commander, I also know that loyalty to the empire was never one of them. With that in mind, I have decided to offer you an opportunity to save her life, if you are interested.”

“Of course I am interested!” she exclaimed. Then she dropped her gaze, knowing that she had forgotten herself yet again, and amended her response. “I mean...yes, Commander, I am very much interested in taking advantage of an opportunity to save my sister’s life.” She looked up at him again. “What must I do?”

He gazed at her in silence for several moments before he answered her. According to the letter of the law, she had addressed him with a lack of respect at least three times since he had arrived. He had more than sufficient cause to discipline her. Then again, they had been discussing the arrest, imprisonment, and interrogation of her older sister, after all. He had to expect at least a little bit of emotionalism from her. Besides, to discipline her now would only prove counterproductive to his ultimate goals. “The Terrans are holding one of our Tal-Shiar agents,” he finally told her. “This agent must not be permitted to betray what he knows to his Federation captors. I want you to infiltrate the Federation Starfleet, locate him, and bring him home. If you do this, D’Vahn, General Varnek has agreed to order your sister’s release.”

“Assuming he still lives, Commander, do we know where they are holding him?”

“We cannot be sure.” He stood up, pleased. He had her. “They took him into custody on the surface of a world they call ‘Parliament.’” He stepped away from the chair and started slowly roaming around her living room, looking things over as though he were inspecting her quarters. “We do not know if they are still holding him there or if they have moved him elsewhere,” he told her as he gazed at the collection of knickknacks on her shelves, “but that will be the most...logical...place for you to begin your search.”

“How much time will I have to accomplish my mission, sir?”

“As much time as you need,” he replied as he moved on to her home entertainment equipment. “Just bear in mind as you pursue your mission, the longer you take to accomplish

your goals, the longer your sister will remain confined and the more interrogation sessions she will be forced to endure. I can do nothing for her until you return having succeeded.”

D’Vahn stood up, almost to the position of attention, and proclaimed, “I will not fail you, sir.” Then she relaxed a little and asked, somewhat hesitantly, “But...if I were to fail, Commander...what would happen to my sister?”

He turned to her. “If you fail to eliminate the threat, Sub-lieutenant Charvon, one way or the other, then you will have failed your sister completely.”

“One way or the other, sir?”

“Yes, D’Vahn,” he confirmed, “one way or the other. If at any time you determine that you cannot secure our agent’s escape from custody or return him to Rihannsu space, then your orders are to kill him.”

“*Kill him?*” she exclaimed. “But, Commander...he is an agent of the Tal-Shiar! He is one of us—a comrade!”

“Yes, he is an agent of the Tal-Shiar,” Tal acknowledged, “and that is exactly why he *must* not be allowed to remain alive in Terran custody.” He followed with his eyes as D’Vahn turned from him and walked over to her balcony window. “He knows too much, D’Vahn, and sooner or later he *will* talk.” As she stood gazing out through her window, Tal approached her from behind. “The Terrans *will* torture him until he discloses all that he knows.” He stopped and stood to one side and only slightly behind her, looking down at her with...what? Pity? Lust? Genuine affection? Even he could not be sure.

“If I... If I am forced to kill him, what will happen to my sister then?” she asked.

“She may still be allowed to live,” Tal replied in a much more gentle tone of voice. D’Vahn cringed slightly, as though she hadn’t been aware that he was standing so close to her, then turned around and looked up at him. He inched slightly closer until he was nearly pressing her back against the window, then concluded, “But she will likely spend the rest of her life imprisoned.”

“I am new to the Tal-Shiar, Commander,” she reminded him. “I am well trained, but I lack experience.” She dropped her gaze to the floor. “With my sister’s life on the line, I fear this mission may be too much for me.”

“If that is the case, then you likely sentence your sister to death.” He reached up and caressed her cheek affectionately, then lifted her chin until her deep blue eyes met his once more. “Accept this assignment, D’Vahn. Do it for your sister’s sake—for your sister’s *life*.”

She hesitated, swallowed hard, and then responded, “Very well, Commander. Under the conditions that you have laid out for me, I accept the assignment.”

He smiled. “Excellent. I knew that you would choose the honorable path, D’Vahn.”

He gazed into her eyes for another moment, and D’Vahn quickly slipped out from between him and the window before he could do anything more. “What will I do?” she asked as she stepped away to put a little distance between herself and her commander. “How will I infiltrate the Federation Starfleet?”

“I have a plan laid out,” he told her, turning to face her but holding his place by the window, “and we have already begun preparations. Report to my vessel in four hours, Sub-Lieutenant Charvon—the Warbird *Talon*, currently in orbit.” He pulled a comm-link from his coat pocket. “I will brief you then.”

“Understood, Commander.”

He manipulated the buttons on the link as he added, "I will also give you something to read during our voyage to the neutral zone border that I believe will have a motivating effect on you."

"What, Commander?" she inquired.

"Something pertaining to your sister," he replied. "That is all I wish to say about it at this time."

"Very well, Commander. I look forward to it," she told him. And then a transporter beam whisked him away.

* * * * *

Admiral Laura Roslyn sat behind her desk in the Starfleet Academy dean's office and stared poker-faced at the two frightened cadets sitting across from her—one a human male, the other a Deltan female. Unlike some in the admiralty, she loved the experimental new two-tone gray-green and white admiral's tunic, and she wore it as often as she could. Not only because the matching gray-green skirt she always wore with it was several inches longer than the older skants were, but also because it made her stand out as an admiral rather than just as the dean of the academy, which tended to have a certain advantageous psychological effect on the corps of cadets...like the two who sat before her now.

"I couldn't help myself, Dean...I mean, Admiral," the young man told her. "She is a Deltan, after all. I'm just an unwitting victim of biochemistry."

"No excuse, Cadet," she replied. "Absent some kind of alien influence, you're still responsible for your actions."

"But her pheromones *are* an alien influence!" he insisted. "That's what I'm trying to tell you!" She raised her eyebrows and glared at him. "Ma'am," he added quickly. "I mean...sir. I mean...Dean. Admiral."

"I understand that they do, in fact, possess a biochemistry that does have some sort of effect on humanoid males," Roslyn acknowledged, "But the sort of behavior that the two of you were caught engaging in is not tolerated here at Starfleet Academy and you know it."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, dropping his gaze in shame.

"And you, young lady," Roslyn went on, turning her attention to the very pretty bald-headed Deltan with eyebrows as black as the collar of her silver tunic. "You certainly know better. You swore an oath of celibacy—an oath that Starfleet Command takes very seriously." She paused for a moment and looked at them both in turn, then continued, "What the two of you did...what the two of you were *caught* doing and where...threatens discipline within the ranks—not only here at Starfleet Academy, but also throughout the fleet."

"Excuse me, Admiral?" her receptionist called over the intercom.

Roslyn pressed her comm. button and responded with a simple, "Yes?"

"Admiral Morrow is here to see you, ma'am."

Roslyn hesitated for a moment, then asked, as though she had no idea who Admiral Morrow was, "Admiral who?"

"Admiral Harry Morrow," the younger woman replied, "*from Starfleet Command.*"

"I don't know any Admiral Harry Morrow," she told her receptionist.

“Shall I have the computer run an identification check on him?”

“Does he have an appointment?”

“He says he does not, ma’am, but he tells me it’s important that he see you.”

Roslyn looked at the pair of young cadets in front of her again, then said, “Very well. Negative on the identification check. After I’ve finished with these two and dismissed them, you can send him in.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She closed the channel. “All right, you two, I’m letting you off with a warning. Get caught engaging in that kind of behavior again and I’ll expel you both. Do I make myself perfectly crystal clear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the cadets answered together.

“Good.” She glanced back and forth between them for several more seconds, and then finally told them, “All right. You’re dismissed.”

The cadets stood up and assumed the position of attention. Roslyn nodded slightly to them and they looked at each other and almost grinned as they turned, likely over having gotten off so easily. They straightened the chairs they had been sitting in quickly and then headed for the door, hopefully not noticing when Roslyn let a slight smirk of her own cross her features. *Ah, to be that young again*, she thought as she watched them go. *I just hope they can avoid getting caught next time.*

The cadets exchanged greetings with Admiral Morrow as they passed him on his way in, and Roslyn couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw Morrow’s gaze linger on the Deltan girl a little longer than was necessary to satisfy his social obligation. “Are you coming in, Admiral?” she called to him, hiding her smirk well. “Or should I sent a company of MACOs to rescue you?”

“What?” he asked her, suddenly looking her way. If the young Deltan had caught her meaning, she gave no sign of it, and before Roslyn could repeat herself, Morrow answered her, “Oh. Yeah, I’m coming in.” He hurried inside, pointing back over his shoulder with his thumb as he closed the door and asking, “Was that a...”

“A Deltan female?” Roslyn finished asking for him. “Yes.”

“Then it’s true,” he concluded as he took a seat in one of her guest chairs.

“Oh it’s true all right,” she confirmed.

He grinned. “So those two...”

“Yes, Harry,” she again confirmed. “They got caught engaging in...interplanetary diplomacy.”

“Resulting in a marked improvement in alien relations, I’ll wager,” he then remarked.

“What the hell are you doing here, Harry?” Roslyn asked him, changing the subject. “I thought we agreed you would never come see me here.”

“Well, you didn’t seem to be too thrilled about me dropping in on you at home in the middle of the night so...”

“That doesn’t make it all right for you to come *here* instead, where so many people can see that we’re meeting. We’re not supposed to know each other, Harry,” she reminded him. “Now my assistant and two cadets know otherwise.”

“We’re Starfleet Admirals, Laura, both of us assigned to San Francisco,” he pointed out. “What are the chances we wouldn’t at least be acquainted with each other?”

"I just think it's best we be extra careful right now," she countered.

"Noted," he acknowledged. "Now, do you want my report?"

She sighed, then answered, "Yeah. Go ahead. Would you like some coffee?"

"Sure. Black, please."

Roslyn stood up and walked over to her food dispenser in the side wall. "So you went after the Romulan spy as I asked?"

"I did."

"And?" she asked as she leafed through the various food and beverage cartridges.

"And he's not there," Morrow told her straight out.

Roslyn found the right cartridge at that same moment, but just stood there holding it as she stared back at Morrow. "What?" she finally asked him, not wanting to believe her ears. "What do you mean, he's not there?"

"Exactly what I said, Laura," he replied when she finally slipped the cartridge into the slot. "He's no longer being held on Parliament."

"Where *is* he being held then?" she asked as the dispenser door slid up and open to reveal two cups of steaming coffee. "Did he escape?"

"No, he didn't escape," he assured her, "but I don't know yet where he's being held." Roslyn took the cups of coffee out of the dispenser and approached him as its door slid back down into place. Then, as she handed one of the cups to him, he added, "*Endeavour* Security personnel took him aboard their vessel, and *Endeavour* warped away before I got there. So far I haven't been able to find out where they took him."

"I'll bet Nogura knows where he is," she said as she walked back behind her desk and sat down. "He probably ordered the transfer himself."

"That wouldn't surprise me in the least," Morrow told her.

"*Endeavour* is Captain Chris MacLeod's ship, isn't it?" she asked him as he sipped his coffee. "The newest *Bonhomme-Richard*-class to launch?"

He swallowed, then replied, "That's right."

"Isn't he a friend of yours?"

"He and I have known each other for a few years," he confirmed, "but I wouldn't say we're friends, exactly. More like professional acquaintances who've always been on friendly terms, I think."

"Friendly enough that you could just ask him where he took the spy?"

"Now who's not being careful?" he asked her, being careful to form the accusation as a question. After all, not only did she outrank him, she was also the director of their section. "If MacLeod transferred the spy on Nogura's order, then Nogura trusts him. And if Nogura trusts him, we probably can't. Not with anything that might strike him as shady."

"Good point," she agreed. "We'll have to find out another way."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"Good, because I have one."

"I'm all ears."

"So will we be...after you bug Nogura's office."

Morrow practically choked on his coffee, then stared wide-eyed at Roslyn. "Excuse me, what did you just say?"

"You heard me, Harry."

“Yeah, I heard you.” He set his coffee down on Roslyn’s desk. “But just to be sure I heard you *correctly*, you want me to plant listening devices in the office of the Starfleet vice-admiral who stands perhaps the best chance among all the admiralty of being the next C-in-C of Starfleet?”

“That’s right,” Roslyn confirmed.

“That isn’t going to be easy, Laura,” he pointed out to her as he stood up, genuinely concerned.

“No, it isn’t,” Roslyn agreed. Then she reiterated, “We need to find that spy, Harry. We need to eliminate the threat he represents.”

“I know that, Laura, and I agree.” He started to leave. “I just wish I didn’t.” The door opened for him. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Okay, but not here,” she said. “Back to the old routine next time.”

CHAPTER 5

As Commander Tal sat staring up at the image of space that filled the main screen on the bridge of the Warbird *Talon*, he knew the time had almost come, for those stars that lay before them now were not those of the star empire, but rather those of the enemy Federation.

“Approaching maximum limit of Federation sensors, Commander,” the helmsman dutifully reported as he had been ordered. “Estimate three minutes.”

“All stop,” Tal commanded. “Hold relative position here, beyond their range.”

“All stop, Commander,” the helmsman confirmed. “Holding station.”

Tal turned to his command console and activated the comm.-panel. “Sub-Lieutenant Charvon, it is time,” he said. “Report to the hangar deck.”

Because the warbird was an adaptation of the Klingon D-7 battlecruiser design, much of its interior was an economic modification of what was already there rather than something designed and built from the ground up. As a result, officers’ quarters were small and simple, though no doubt they were nicer and much more comfortable than he enlisted troops’ open bays, which had only been outfitted with dividers to provide each troop with at least *some* privacy. D’Vahn lay wide awake on top of her bunk, thinking, still wearing the black and white-pattern mid-length dress she’d been wearing when she came aboard. She hadn’t even unfastened its black leather belt, though she had taken off her boots before she stretched out.

“*Sub-Lieutenant Charvon, it is time,*” she heard Commander Tal’s voice tell her over the speaker right after the comm. tone sounded. “*Report to the hangar deck.*”

“Already?” she muttered as she sat up on the side of her bunk and dropped her bare feet to the deck. “I thought I was going to have at least one more day to prepare.” She stood up and unfastened her belt as she walked over to the desk.

“*Sub-Lieutenant Charvon, do you hear me?*”

“Patience clearly is not one of the commander’s strengths,” she mumbled under her breath as she reached for the panel. She tapped the comm. button to reply as she started to unfasten her dress.

“*Sub-Lieutenant...*”

“Yes, Commander, I hear you,” she replied, interrupting as she finished unfastening her dress and slipped it off. “I will be there in a few moments, sir. Sub-Lieutenant Charvon out.” She closed the channel without waiting for the commander to acknowledge—he was beginning to wear on her nerves—and then walked over to her closet to get her uniform.

Sub-Lieutenant Charvon, having donned her uniform for the first time since boarding the *Talon*—for the first time since completing her Tal-Shiar training, for that matter—passed through the forward airlock into the hangar bay to find Commander Tal waiting for her, tablet in hand, standing outside the open hatch on the port side of what appeared to be a standard-design Starfleet shuttlecraft, parked facing aft, ready to launch. It’s markings identified it as belonging to Earth Outpost-6...assuming, of course, that she was reading them correctly. The Terrans’ primary language was nothing if not frustratingly confusing. In the ancient language

that Vulcan and Rihannsu shared, some of those symbols on the craft's hull, like the curving one on the right end that looped back on itself, meant something entirely different.

"The uniform was neither necessary nor required, Sub-lieutenant," Tal told her as she approached him.

"You neglected to inform me of that, Commander," she replied.

He gazed at her for a moment, then said, "No matter. You can dispose of it after you board this vessel."

"Dispose of it?" she inquired.

"Yes, as you will be infiltrating Federation space, and soon after that, the Terran Starfleet," he told her. "You will find what clothing you need aboard. Change into them and then throw your uniform out." He handed her the tablet. "This contains your orders and the all the details of your mission. Learn them."

"And the other?" she asked as she accepted the tablet. "The material you promised to give to me to read and have not yet given me?"

"I decided to wait until I knew that you would be alone. It is there as well."

"Alone, sir?" she asked. Then she pointed out, "I am not a pilot, Commander. I do not know how to fly this vessel."

"It has been preprogrammed," he informed her. "It will respond to your every voice command as though you are manipulating the controls yourself." He dropped his gaze to the tablet. "Everything you will need to know from the moment you launch is on there. You need only go along for the ride." When she only stood there without moving, he looked her in the eye and concluded, "Now, Sub-lieutenant."

"Yes, Commander," she replied as though snapping back awake after a brief sleep.

Tal watched her step up and into the shuttlecraft, waited a few moments for her uniform and boots to come flying back out onto the deck, and then picked them up and left the hangar deck when the shuttlecraft's hatch began to close.

* * * * *

Captain's log, stardate 2747.5. The preliminary stages of the investigation Admiral Nogura has assigned me to conduct, which Admiral Withrow has ordered me to initiate immediately, has brought the Enterprise back home to Earth, where I hope to get some direct answers out of Admiral Nogura that will help me to pursue the investigation as efficiently and effectively as possible. As for why Admiral Nogura didn't tell me everything I needed to know up front I can only speculate, but knowing him, he had his reasons.

"Standard orbit achieved, Captain," Lieutenant Xon reported from the helm.

"Lieutenant Uhura, raise Admiral Nogura at Starfleet Command," Kirk ordered.

"Are you really sure you want to do this, Jim?" Doctor McCoy asked him while he gazed over at the weapons control station where Ensign Kirk was still sitting, despite having almost nothing to do there. As he often did, McCoy had spent some of his downtime during the voyage home standing at Kirk's side, bantering back and forth with Commander Spock

whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Kirk started to ask him to what he was referring, but that question answered itself as soon as he realized where he was looking. “You cleared him for duty yourself, Bones,” he reminded his old friend. “He has continued to perform his duties satisfactorily and performed quite admirably on Kronos. Spock believes this is the next logical step.”

“Spock isn’t a psychologist, Jim,” McCoy pointed out.

“What are you worried about?”

“Honestly? I’m worried the ensign might take advantage of your inclination to let him be involved and turn the opportunity into his own personal quest for revenge.”

“You told me your evaluation indicated that won’t be a concern,” Kirk reminded him.

“Even the most thorough psychological evaluations can be fooled if the subject knows exactly what the evaluator is looking for,” McCoy countered, “and given that this particular subject happens to be a Kirk...”

“Captain?” Uhura called out, interrupting the doctor before he could deliver whatever latest disparaging remark he had been about to apply to his captain’s lineage, at which Kirk had already begun to grin. Then, when Kirk looked back at her, she told him, “I have Admiral Nogura on the line, sir.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant. On screen, please.”

The image of Earth, in orbit of which Kirk saw engineers and construction workers had begun framing out a brand new space station—a station that was going to be much larger than anything else that had ever been put into orbit, judging by the diameter of the circle they had already framed out—wavered and was replaced by that of Admiral Nogura, wearing that odd new green-gray and white admiral’s shirt again. “*Captain Kirk,*” he began. “*I understand that you have finally begun your investigation and would like to come down here and ask me some questions?*”

“That’s right, Admiral,” Kirk confirmed for him. “And if it’s all right, I’d like to bring my first officer, Mister Spock, along.”

“*By all means, Captain.*”

“Thank you, Admiral. I’ll be bringing one of my newer ensigns along as well—part of his extended training. Ensign Peter Kirk. Kirk out.” He closed the channel and stood up as his nephew turned around and gazed at him, then pointed over at him and said, “Spock, Bones... Ensign, you’re with us.”

“Aye, sir,” Peter acknowledged as he practically jumped to his feet to join his uncle and the others.

Kirk led all three of them into the turbolift, then told the computer after the doors had closed, “Deck seven.”

McCoy turned to Peter as the lift started to descend and inquired, “So, how are you handling things, Ensign? Any issues you’d like to discuss?”

“You mean right here in front of my captain and his first officer, Doctor?” Peter asked him in return, looking him right in the eye.

“Well...” That had apparently been the last kind of response McCoy had expected to receive. It seemed to throw him off of his game a little bit, and when he glanced at the captain only to find him grinning back at him, all he could say was, “We can talk later.”

“Are you asking if I still blame myself for Alex’s death, Doctor?” Peter then asked

him, perhaps just to let him off the hook.

"That is indeed what he is asking you, Ensign," Spock offered.

McCoy glared at Spock. "I can speak for myself, Spock, thank you very much."

"Thank you, Doctor," Spock replied. "For a moment there, I was unsure as to whether that was, in fact, the case."

McCoy grimaced, then looked back at Peter and confirmed, "Yes, Ensign, that is what I was asking."

"As I indicated," Spock remarked.

McCoy glared at Spock again—Captain Kirk, of course, was enjoying every moment of it—but then looked back at the ensign when he finally started to give him a real answer.

"I think I'll always feel like I'm at least *partially* to blame, Doctor," Peter told him. "I *did* push to get myself assigned to the *Copernicus* team, and if I hadn't been there..."

"That's exactly what concerns me, Jim," McCoy told the captain before Peter could even finish what he was saying. "I don't think he's ready to take on something like this."

"I *am* ready, sir," Peter argued, drawing the doctor's attention back to him...along with that of the captain and first officer. "While I do believe that if I'd made different choices Alex might still be alive, I *know* that his death wasn't my fault. Alex took his own life rather than allow himself to fall victim to the bloodworms. Bloodworms that would have dealt him a much more gruesome and painful death had he waited any longer." The lift doors opened and Peter led the way out into the corridor, turned to the right, and started walking. "Bloodworms that wouldn't have been there at all if Section Thirty-One hadn't been carrying out an illegal black operation."

"So you blame Section Thirty-One for Alex's death?" Kirk asked his nephew as he quickly caught up to him.

"I believe they were ultimately responsible if only indirectly, yes, sir."

"There wasn't anything illegal about Doctor Yar's research, Ensign," McCoy pointed out. "Not that I can determine, at least."

"Maybe not, sir," Peter tentatively agreed. "But the way in which that son-of-a..." He paused under his uncle's gaze. Blodgett might have been a sniveling son-of-a-bitch, but he was also a superior officer, and Uncle Jim—*Captain Kirk*—would not stand for his junior officers referring to their superior officers in that way, so he started over. "The way that Commander Blodgett intended to *use* that research...well, if not for him and Section Thirty-One, Doctor Yar probably would have been conducting it somewhere else entirely—a much more secure facility with better containment infrastructure."

"Sounds logical to me, Bones," Kirk commented.

"Yes, Captain, quite logical indeed," Spock confirmed.

McCoy sighed. "Two Kirks and a Vulcan straight-man," he remarked as he peeled off and headed toward the sickbay. "Why do I even bother?"

Kirk laughed lightly and led his first officer and his nephew into Transporter Room-1. "Have we received clearance?" he asked the operator as he and his party stepped up onto the platform.

"Yes, sir," the operator replied. "I'll be putting you down in a transporter room only about thirty meters from Admiral Nogura's office on the same floor, sir."

"Excellent," Kirk said as he and the others took their positions. "Energize as soon as

you're ready."

"Energizing now, sir," the operator advised him as he finished setting the coordinates and grasped the slides. "Good luck."

Kirk grimaced as the beam took him. It seemed even transporter chiefs had heard the stories about what it was like to have to deal with Admiral Nogura.

Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, and Ensign Kirk beamed into the newly expanded Earth-based Starfleet Headquarters—with Starbase-1's headquarters facility having sustained much more serious damage during the Romulan attack than had initially been identified, all command personnel formerly stationed there had been temporarily reassigned to the facility on Earth pending construction of the new station, which was likely to take several years at least. "Welcome to Starfleet Headquarters San Francisco, Captain Kirk, Commander Spock, Ensign," the transporter operator said as all three of them stepped down off of the platform. "Admiral Nogura is expecting you. Turn left, then straight down the hall."

"Thank you, Chief," Kirk replied as he led his small party out.

Admiral Nogura was sitting behind his large antique oak desk—he had centered it in front of and faced it directly away from the large bay window behind him, so that he could take full advantage of the sunlight, the brightness of which he'd always preferred over any of the relatively dimmer artificial office lighting he'd ever had, regardless of how much "just like the sun" they were supposed to be. He was hard at work planning an operation when the call finally came from his executive assistant.

"Admiral, Captain Kirk and party are here to see you."

Nogura stood up and stepped back to his window to gaze out over the Presidio, the beautiful crystal blue bay sparkling in the late morning sunlight, and the iconic Golden Gate Bridge that seemed almost to glow under that same illumination. "Send them in, please."

"Yes, sir."

A few moments later he heard his door open and then Captain Kirk saying, "Admiral Nogura. Good morning, sir. Thank you for seeing us."

"Captain Kirk," he replied to the greeting in kind. Then he added, without turning to look, "Commander Spock, Ensign Kirk."

"Ad... Admiral Nogura, sir," the ensign replied. "Good morning, sir."

Nogura touched his hand to the glass, turning it instantly opaque, then turned around and faced his visitors as they approached his desk. He glanced at all three of them in turn, and then settled his eyes on the captain. "I understand why you'd want to bring Commander Spock with you, Captain, but why this other young man?"

"This is Ensign Peter Kirk, Admiral," Kirk introduced him. "My nephew and a recent academy graduate who's been proving himself a valuable member of my crew."

Nogura gazed at Peter as he returned to his desk and sat down. "What are you doing here, Ensign?" he asked.

"I... uh..." He looked to his captain and then to the first officer but found no help in either of them, so turned his eyes back to the admiral and did his best to answer the man's question. "Captain Kirk assigned me to work closely with him on this investigation, sir," he

offered tentatively. “He felt that as a part of that assignment, I should be in on this discussion and...I agreed with him. Sir.”

Nogura gazed at him for several silent moments, during which time Peter determined to hold the man’s gaze and not look away. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, “Makes sense to me.” Finally, he gestured toward the two visitors’ chairs in front of his desk and said, “Please, gentlemen, have a seat.”

As Captain Kirk sat down in one of the chairs, Peter stepped back and gestured toward the other chair as he looked at Spock. “Sir?”

“I shall stand, Ensign,” the first officer told him.

“Yes, sir,” Peter replied. Then he took the seat beside his uncle while Spock centered himself behind the chairs and folded his hands behind his back.

“So, let’s get right down to it, Captain,” Nogura said. Then he started things off by asking, “What can I do for you?”

“You hinted through Admiral Withrow that I should start this investigation by talking with Colonel Finnegan, sir,” Kirk reminded him.

“And Colonel Finnegan confirmed what you already suspected—that I intentionally sabotaged Starfleet’s plan to permanently assign MACOs to the *Enterprise* by selecting his unit specifically, knowing the two of you would struggle to get along.”

“As a matter of fact, yes he did,” Kirk confirmed.

“You and he are exactly correct, Captain,” the admiral freely admitted. “I did, in fact, intentionally sabotage that plan.”

Kirk wasn’t real sure what kind of response he had expected to get from Nogura, but an immediate admission of what he had done certainly hadn’t been in the running. “Forgive me, Admiral,” Spock interjected before he could respond, “but I fail to see the logic behind your action. Given the threat posed to the Federation by the Klingon Empire at that time, not to mention the risk to your own career...”

“It wasn’t a matter of logic, Commander Spock,” the admiral explained. “I based my decision on morality. The risk to my career was irrelevant. *Enterprise* is a vessel dedicated to peaceful exploration. She’s not and never has been a warship. The need to defend ourselves against enemy aggression is unfortunately a very real one, but for as long as I have the honor to serve I will never allow Starfleet to be turned into a primarily military force.”

“Your approval of the *Bonhomme-Richard*-class heavy cruisers’ enhanced armaments would seem to indicate otherwise, Admiral,” Spock pointed out. “For example, *Endeavour*’s photon torpedo launchers...”

“Precautionary only, Mister Spock,” Nogura told him. “*Endeavour* and the others of her class are going to be assigned to explore sectors on the other side of Federation space—sectors that we’re only now beginning to reach into. We have no idea what to expect in those regions.” He dropped his gaze back to Kirk. “But let’s get back to the business at hand, shall we? The Romulans attacked us, and they did so with inside help. We know that. I suspect that help came from Section Thirty-One.”

“As do I, Admiral,” Kirk agreed. “That’s hardly very much of a leap. But let me ask you this, sir. If you already suspected them, why didn’t you just tell me that from the start? Why did you want me to talk to Finnegan first?”

“Because, Captain... First, while I do have some pretty substantial evidence against

them, I do *not* have any solid proof, and if one intends to go after Section Thirty-One, for *any* reason, one had better have a substantial amount of solid proof. And second, I wanted you to know without a doubt that you can trust me.”

“I *already* trust you, Admiral,” Kirk told him. “How would...”

“Third,” Nogura continued in stride, interrupting, “assuming Thirty-One truly *is* to blame, we can’t trust subspace communications.”

“I beg your pardon, Admiral, but none of that answers my question,” Kirk pointed out. “Why did I have to talk with Colonel Finnegan before I talked to you?”

“Because you need to know that you can trust him as well,” Nogura replied. “He and I are working together on this and you might have to work with him again before it’s all over.”

“Finnegan’s working *with* you?” Kirk asked, surprised.

“That’s right,” Nogura confirmed.

“*Against* Section Thirty-One?”

“Yes, Captain,” Nogura answered, beginning to grow impatient. “Colonel Finnegan is working *with* me *against* Section Thirty-One’s plans to militarize the fleet. Why is that so hard to believe?”

“He’s a MACO commander, sir, and he thoroughly enjoyed my discomfort when he and his unit were assigned to the *Enterprise* in accordance with their plan.”

“Did he really, Captain?” Nogura inquired. “Or was your perception perhaps colored by your personal feelings toward him?”

Spock chose that moment to clear his throat. Kirk looked back over his shoulder at him, but the Vulcan only stared straight ahead, one eyebrow raised, avoiding eye contact.

“Who commands Section Thirty-One, Admiral?” Peter asked, drawing all three pairs of eyes to him, his uncle’s expression one of disapproval. Peter did a double take and quickly realized what that expression was telling him, then said, almost whispering, “Sorry, Captain.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ensign,” the admiral told him. “That’s a perfectly logical question.”

“Indeed,” Spock added, presumably agreeing with the admiral.

“The answer is, I don’t know, unfortunately,” Nogura replied, “though I’d venture to guess there are some high-ranking flag officers among them. What I *do* know is that Section Thirty-One is run by a director and four deputies, but I don’t actually know who any of them are. I’ve been summoned to their...their star chamber, for lack of a better term, more than a few times, but they’re always sitting in that dark room in the shadows. I can never get a good look at any of them. It’s quite the cheesy cliché, actually.”

“Where do you suggest we go from here, Admiral?” Spock asked him.

“You base your life on logic, Commander. Where would you start?”

Spock thought it over for a moment, then answered, “The Romulan spy who posed as Ambassador Sarek.”

“I agree,” Kirk declared. Then he asked, “We *are* still holding him on Parliament, are we not, Admiral?”

“We are still holding him, yes,” Nogura confirmed, “but not on Parliament. Before the *Endeavour* left orbit, I directed Captain MacLeod to take him aboard and deliver him to a facility at another location.”

“Where?” Kirk asked.

“I don’t know, Captain,” Nogura told him—certainly not an answer he had expected.

“You’ll have to ask Captain MacLeod yourself. I ordered him not to tell me, but to tell you if you asked...*if* he could do so with absolute security.”

“And because we can’t trust subspace communications, we’ll have to rendezvous with the *Endeavour*,” Kirk concluded.

“That’s right,” Nogura confirmed.

“You’re turning this into a real wild goose chase, Admiral,” Kirk remarked as he and Peter stood up with the admiral. “Except in this case, there really is a wild goose to be had at the end of the chase.”

“I’d make it easier if I could, Kirk, but we need to be very careful.”

“Admiral,” Kirk said with a nod, taking his leave.

“Good luck, Captain,” Nogura told him as he watched the captain of the *Enterprise* and his party depart.

* * * * *

Admiral Morrow stood beside the visitor’s chair in the Section-31 star chamber—he’d overheard Admiral Nogura refer to it by that name and had come to agree, after researching the historical significance of the name, that it was indeed a fitting one—and gazed up at the five figures seated in the shadows behind their raised semi-circular table, none of whom he could actually see and only one of whose identity he knew. That was the way they liked it, he had decided long ago. The less he knew, the better.

“He’s shrewd. I’ll give him that,” one of the deputies remarked.

“We’ve known for some time now what we’re up against where Heihachiro Nogura is concerned,” Admiral Roslyn reminded them.

“Congratulation, Admiral Morrow, on figuring out how best to bug his office without being discovered,” another of her deputies said.

“You will have to put your best people on it, Admiral,” Roslyn told him.

“I intend to, Director,” Morrow assured her.

“I mean it, Harry,” she said while the deputy on her right leaned in and whispered into her ear. “They’re going to have to follow *Enterprise* all the way to the rendezvous without being detected, and we don’t know how long or how far that will be.”

“Where’s the *Endeavour* now?” one of the deputies asked.

“We don’t know and we don’t dare inquire,” Roslyn told him. “Were we to do so, it might draw unwanted attention our way.”

“You needn’t worry, Director,” Morrow told her. “I know just the people. How soon can the ship be ready?”

“It’s ready now, Admiral,” she replied. “Activate your agents and retrieve that spy before Kirk does.”

CHAPTER 6

As the Federation shuttlecraft bearing the markings of Earth Outpost-6 soared through space—she had taken a few moments shortly after launch to check the language database and had verified that that was, in fact, what the markings indicated was the craft’s origin—Sub-Lieutenant D’Vahn lounged as comfortably as she could, sliding down a little bit in the single second row chair opposite the portside hatch with her bare legs stretched out ahead of her and crossed at the ankles, the tablet that Tal had given her in hand. She was rereading her orders, again, and studying all of the materials the commander had provided once more. A glance up at the chronometer told her that she had been doing that for the last several hours now—yes, that was the term. Hours. Hours, minutes, and seconds...weeks, months, and years. If she was going to pull this off, she was going to have to get used to thinking about the passage of time in Federation units.

What she had *not* gotten used to yet was the idea that she was going to have to don the uniform of her enemy. Yes, the so-called clothing that Tal had provided had turned out to be a command-gold Starfleet officer’s uniform bearing the single bands of a lieutenant around each of its cuffs. No Romulan clothing at all, which made sense, of course, and nothing that Federation civilians might wear. Nothing but the uniform of their enemy and a few sets of appropriate underclothes to wear beneath it. Tal obviously expected her to spend her entire time in Federation space ‘on duty.’ She would have to put the uniform on eventually, of course, but from the moment she had first laid eyes on it she had decided to put off staining herself in that way for as long as possible and had instead spent the entire flight dressed in nothing but her short shift and underpants.

She came to the end of the material, again, and decided that she had studied enough. She knew everything that she was going to need to know and more study could do nothing more to prepare her. She was about to power down the tablet when a video image suddenly appeared on its own, paused—an image of Commander Tal. She tapped the ‘play’ icon.

“Sub-Lieutenant Charvon,” Tal’s image began. *“What follows is the material that I told you about early—that material meant to motivate you. It is a small portion of the time your sister has spent with her interrogators, extracted from the recordings of her preliminary debriefing sessions. Unless something has changed since your departure, she has continued to stand by what she says in this recording throughout all subsequent sessions. She has not changed a single detail of her story, and I believe she is relating the truth of what happened. Tap the ‘play’ icon again to watch.”*

D’Vahn tapped that icon again immediately and a pair of close-up images of her older sister appeared on a split-screen, one from ahead and the left of her, the other from ahead and right. D’Vahn’s heart leapt in her side at seeing her sister again—until Tal’s news of her return, she had thought she never would. The thin white straps over her shoulders indicated that she had been stripped of her outer clothing but was still wearing her shift. She looked exhausted, but did not appear to have been beaten or abused, let alone subjected to any kind of torture. Then again, Commander Tal had mentioned that this recording was taken from one of her preliminary debriefings. Fates only knew what they might have done to her later.

“I did not believe this excuse for a moment, of course,” the recording began. To what

excuse might her sister have been referring? She was clearly continuing an explanation of the circumstances surrounding her loss of the cloaking device and subsequent abduction that she had begun at some point earlier, before the beginning of this recording. Why couldn't Tal have given her just that much more? *"But neither did I wish to destroy the Enterprise—she would have made quite the prize—so I agreed to a temporary exchange of hostages, two of my officers for Kirk and his second-in-command, and to listen to what Kirk had to say."*

"Kirk and his second-in-command, Commander Spock—a Vulcan—then came aboard the Talon. I accused Kirk of invading Rihannsu space in an attempt to steal the cloaking device. He denied my accusation, of course, so I threatened to torture him until he confessed, but Commander Spock spoke up and eliminated the need to do so. The Vulcan testified for the record that Kirk had become mentally unstable and ordered the violation of our territory on his own authority. Kirk became enraged over this betrayal and I ordered him confined. I then informed the Enterprise crew of what had happened and ordered the acting captain to follow my vessel back to ch'Rihan. Like his captain, he was stubborn and refused my order."

"But still, I did not want to destroy the Enterprise. Not while I still had other options. Spock had revealed to me that he was half-Terran, so I attempted to...appeal to that side of his nature. It started off well and appeared to be working, but then I was notified that Kirk had been injured while resisting confinement. I ordered his ship's surgeon brought aboard to examine him. He informed me that Kirk had become mentally incapacitated, corroborating Spock's testimony. I then named Spock commander of the Enterprise. Kirk then called him a traitor and attacked him and threatened to kill him. Spock defended himself and the surgeon pronounced Kirk dead, so I allowed him to take Kirk's body back to the Enterprise."

"I then continued my attempts to appeal to Spock's Terran side. I even told him that a place could be found for him in our fleet if he would do but one thing first. I explained to him that he would lead some of my troops aboard the Enterprise, take command, and then bring the ship to ch'Rihan. And he agreed! He agreed!" she shouted.

"We continued to grow closer and I stepped into my chambers to change out of my uniform. I thought that perhaps something more...feminine...might aid in my efforts. Shortly after that, Sub-commander Tal interrupted those efforts to report that the source of a covert alien transmission had been traced to my quarters. Spock turned over his communicator and surrendered himself immediately. Turned out he had been working to distract me all along."

"It was at that moment that I realized the cloaking device was at imminent risk. We proceeded immediately to the restricted area, but we were too late. The device had already been stolen. I ordered Spock's immediate execution, but he invoked the Right of Statement. I granted him that right according to law. He began with a free admission of his guilt and went on for quite some time, but then I heard the Enterprise transporter beam begin to take him. I did not know what else to do, so I stepped into the beam with him."

D'Vahn dropped her feet to the deck and sat up straight. Dion had allowed herself to be taken aboard the enemy vessel intentionally?"

"Once aboard the Enterprise I was taken directly to their bridge," she was saying as the recording continued, "where I found Kirk very much alive and very much in command of his vessel...disguised as one of us! I realized immediately that he had returned to my vessel in the guise of a Rihannsu officer and stolen the cloaking device himself! He was speaking with Sub-Commander Tal at the time, so before anyone could stop me I ordered Tal to destroy the

Enterprise *immediately*.”

D’Vahn stood up, growing angry at Tal as she continued watching the recording. Tal had disobeyed her sister’s command and she had been taken prisoner as a result rather than been allowed to die in service to the Praetor! “Curse you, Tal!” she shouted.

“But it was too late,” her sister had just said. *“Kirk’s engineer had already integrated and aligned the cloaking device with their systems. The Enterprise cloaked and escaped...with me as Kirk’s prisoner.”*

Filled with rage, D’Vahn shouted angrily and hurled the tablet toward the back wall, then screamed at it when it bounced off the wall without breaking and settled face-up on the deck. “Federation serpents! Starfleet thieves! Pirates!” *They* were the ones who had taken her sister prisoner. *They* were the ones who deserved to bear her wrath, not Commander Tal. Yes, Tal had failed to follow her sister’s order, but perhaps that was not his fault. Perhaps he had simply had no time.

She marched to the back of the compartment and picked the tablet up off of the deck. “You will *pay* for your subterfuge one day, Kirk!” she swore, glaring at her sister’s frozen image. “You *and* your accursed ship both! And *you*, Vulcan! You will pay *dearly* for your treachery!”

She continued staring at her sister’s frozen image as she returned to her seat. “What did they do to you, I wonder, dear sister,” she said aloud as though the image could hear her. “To what forms of torture and interrogation did those Federation animals subject you?” She manipulated several of the controls as she sat back down until she finally got the recording to continue playing again.

“From that moment until the time I was finally released to be returned to the empire in exchange for the detained Federation diplomat, I was held in confinement under guard. At first I was interrogated daily—threatened with torture and confinement for life—but I never gave them anything. I betrayed no secrets to the enemy. Eventually, they gave up. I remained in confinement, but I was never ill-treated. Why, I cannot say.”

“Approaching Federation planet Parliament,” the computer announced. “Translator online and standing by.”

D’Vahn stood up, stopped the playback, and set the tablet down in her chair, then stepped up to the center forward viewport, the only one that was currently open, and gazed out at the planet known as Parliament. It was not a unique world in appearance to be sure—rather typical, actually, of what the Federation would refer to as a class-M world, with large land masses and even larger blue-green seas, a small portion of each hidden behind bands of white clouds. Not as beautiful as ch’Rihan to be sure, but not altogether unattractive, either.

She turned her back on the viewport and looked back at the tablet sitting in the chair. “You would be proud of me, dear sister,” she said as she returned to it. “I have reviewed and memorized my orders. I have studied and memorized what we know of the Terran Starfleet’s procedures. I have studied the Vulcans—learned of their dedication to logic and their practice of suppressing all emotion. I have learned to *be* Vulcan. And now I ask for your forgiveness, Dion, for my mission requires that I pose as a Vulcan Starfleet officer, and to do that...” She stared at the tablet for one more second, then started walking aft. “...I must, unfortunately, put on the uniform of our enemy.”

“Starfleet shuttlecraft, this is Parliament Aerospace Traffic Control,” a voice called

out over the open communication channel as she pulled her shift up and off over her head, the computer having automatically filtered the live Terran language transmission. *"We have you on our scope and show you on approach to this facility. Please respond and identify on this channel."* She tossed her shift over the nearest seatback and unzipped the black garment bag that was hanging on the back bulkhead. *"Starfleet shuttlecraft, this is Parliament Aerospace Traffic Control,"* the voice repeated after a moment. *"We have you on our scope and show you on approach to this facility. Please respond and identify on this channel."* She looked forward at the controls as...reluctantly...she started pulling on the Starfleet uniform. *"Starfleet shuttlecraft, I say again, this is Parliament Aerospace Traffic Control. We have you on our scope and show you on approach. Please identify and state your intentions."*

Not wanting the traffic controller to grow too nervous—who knew how long he might wait before he ordered a weapons lock?—D’Vahn through her arm into the sleeve and pulled the skirt on around her as she hurried forward, still in her bare feet. She pushed her other arm through the second sleeve and started closing the front of the garment when she inquired, just to be sure, “Computer, is translation set for outgoing communication as well?”

"Affirmative," the computer replied.

She finished fastening the front of the uniform—the uniform, never *her* uniform—and then reached out to the comm.-panel and opened the outgoing audio. “Parliament Aerospace Traffic Control, this is Earth Outpost-Six shuttlecraft three,” she replied, hoping the computer would disguise what she worried the controller might otherwise recognize to be a Rihannsu accent. “Lieutenant... T’Lon of Starfleet Intelligence.” She could not believe she had almost forgotten the name that she had been directed to use. She sat down on the leading edge of the pilot’s seat, drew a deep breath to try to relax, then continued, “I am traveling on official business for Starfleet Intelligence. Request landing instructions.”

"Stand by," came the reply.

As the seconds passed silently, D’Vahn started to get nervous. What if the controller had noticed her hesitation when she gave him her name? What if he had scanning instruments that would indicate she was using a translator program? What if that program had been able to bypass her open signal and allow him to hear what she had said in Rihannsu? What if...

"Permission to land is granted," the controller advised her, prompting her to let go a sigh of relief. *"Instructions are being uploaded to your navigation computer now."*

"Acknowledged, Parliament," she replied. She muted the outgoing audio, ordered the computer to comply with the instructions, and then went aft once more to pull on her boots.

Minutes later, the shuttlecraft touched down gently in the center of one of the parking platforms that lined the Starfleet side of the aerospace port and powered down. Then, as the platform began slowly rotating, D’Vahn gathered her long hair and tied it back to make it look a little more presentable. That done, she stood up and pulled the two data cartridges she was going to need out of the small slot beside her, thinking, *I hope Commander Tal verified this was done correctly.* Finally, she walked over to the compartment where several Starfleet type-II phasers were stored. She opened the compartment, but then just stood there and gazed at the weapons. *No*, she reminded herself. *Starfleet officers do not routinely arm themselves.*

She closed the compartment and headed for the hatch, hoping that her language skills,

which were amateur at best in her opinion, would prove adequate enough now that she was not going to be able to rely on the translator. She tapped the button and the shuttlecraft hatch began to open. *Here I go, sister.*

She stepped out through the hatch and down onto the circular landing platform, and then halted suddenly, startled by the presence of a pair of two red-shirted Starfleet security officers who seemed almost to appear out of nowhere, standing just off of the platform ahead of her, obviously waiting for her. Both were very fit-looking Terran males whose shirts bore the same silver and gold flower-like insignia on their chests as her uniform did. One was a lieutenant commander, the other a lieutenant, like her. They had type-II phasers hanging off of their hips, and the lieutenant commander had a tricorder slung over one shoulder.

“Lieutenant T’Lon?” the lieutenant commander inquired, gazing down at his tricorder while his partner kept an eye on her.

“Yes, sir,” she verified, being sure to include the rather informal but nonetheless required Terran honorific.

“Your name doesn’t seem to appear in the Starfleet Personnel Database,” he informed her. Then he looked up at her and asked, “You told Parliament A-T-C you’re with Intel, is that right?”

“Yes, sir,” she repeated.

“May I see your personnel data file, please?”

“Certainly, Lieutenant Commander,” she replied as she held one of the data cartridges she was carrying out to him. He took the cartridge and slipped it into his tricorder, and as he examined the readout, D’Vahn noticed that his partner had moved around to stand slightly behind her—a better tactical position, should she try something. A wise precaution, she had to admit. She did find it interesting that the ranking officer didn’t seem too alarmed over her name not appearing in the database. Perhaps intelligence officers’ identities were kept out for security reasons. If so, that might be something the empire could use on a later operation. “Why such heightened security, sir?” she asked, hoping that light conversation might help the man remain relaxed.

“After what happened on Babel and over the founding worlds, Command isn’t taking any chances, Lieutenant,” he explained. “I’m sure you can understand that. In fact, I have to wonder why you didn’t already know that.”

“Of course I knew it,” she replied, thinking quickly. “I simply wasn’t aware the order had reached this far out already.”

The lieutenant commander finished reviewing her record, then extracted the cartridge and handed it back to her. “Here you are, Lieutenant. Everything seems to be in order.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant Commander,” she replied as she accepted it from him, her gaze dropping slightly when he reached back and pulled his communicator out from under the back of his shirt.

He flipped the lid open, waited for the odd chirping noise it made to stop, and then called, “Commander Strock to Security Control.”

Commander? she wondered. *But the rank on his cuffs is that of one step lower.*

“Go ahead, Commander,” the answer came immediately.

Perhaps it is common practice to address lieutenant commanders in that way.

“Lieutenant T’Lon, Starfleet Intelligence, Earth Outpost-Six. Identification and access

authority verified.”

“*Acknowledged. Allow her entry.*”

“Acknowledged. Strock out.”

“I have never been here, Commander,” D’Vahn told him, trying the short form of his rank on for size as he returned his communicator to his belt. “Where may I find the officer in charge of your confinement facility?”

“Security Control,” he replied, seemingly not even noticing the discrepancy. “There’s a bank of public computer terminals inside the lobby to the right. Any one of them will show you where to find it.”

“Thank you, Commander,” she said, trying it once more. Once again he seemed not to notice, so D’Vahn decided that addressing a lieutenant commander as ‘Commander’ had to be a common practice. She stepped around him, and as she walked toward the entrance to the building, she couldn’t help but grin. She had spoken well, her words free of any telltale accent, and had fooled the first two officers she had encountered completely. *I am in.*

She could only hope that her luck would continue to hold out.

The inside of the concourse was quite beautiful, spotlessly clean, and looked almost brand new. Virtually every smooth plain surface was white, but rows of large, color-filtering windows along the edges of the incredibly high ceiling splashed them with a variety of subtle colors, enhancing the beauty of the oversized but otherwise functional architecture. The place was fairly busy, but she wouldn’t have said it was crowded. Starfleet personnel and civilians alike were walking this way and that in all sorts of directions, going about their business, the uniformed Starfleet personnel, she noted, far outnumbering those in civilian clothing. Most of those personnel, probably about 80% of them, were wearing the red of Starfleet Security and Support Services. The rest of them appeared to be divided between the gold and the blue, with the blue making up about three-quarters of their number. She had heard that a very few wore green as well, she recalled, but she did not see any of them here. So, command-track officers were the clear minority among those assigned to Parliament. She was going to have to do her best to keep a low profile.

The walk-up bank of terminals stood in a single row to the left of the entrance. There were no doors or curtains to prevent someone from looking over a user’s shoulder, but at least the terminals themselves were divided from one another by tall privacy screens. D’Vahn stepped up to one of them at random and looked it over, but saw no buttons or other controls. The unit was little more than a small rectangular box and a low-sitting, upward angled screen. *How does one activate this device?* she wondered. Not knowing what else to try, she said, keeping her voice low, “Computer?”

The unit hummed and seemed to come to life as various colored lights began flashing and blinking just beneath what D’Vahn quickly realized was a semi-translucent surface and the screen lit up with the banner of the United Federation of Planets. “*Working,*” the terminal said, seemingly responding directly to her.

“Ah!” she exclaimed triumphantly, a little louder than she had meant to. She glanced around to make sure she hadn’t drawn any unwanted attention—as far as she could tell, she hadn’t—and then told the terminal, fascinated by the idea that she had only needed to speak to it to wake it up, “Show me Security Control.”

A blueprint-type layout diagram, minus such things as utilities piping and ductwork

and maintenance corridors, appeared on the screen almost instantly and the computer began to explain, “*Security Control is located on...*”

“Audio off,” she said. *No one here needs to know where I am going.* The terminal fell silent instantly. She studied the floor plan diagram until she felt sure that she knew exactly where to go, then backed out of the terminal’s narrow booth and headed off in that direction.

Security Control may be only several minutes’ walk from here, but the confinement facility itself stands quite some distance off, she thought as she walked. *I will need to procure a ground vehicle of some kind to get there at a reasonable time.* She noticed that she was approaching the ‘T’-intersection, as expected. *Seems I may be here somewhat longer than I anticipated.* She turned right at the ‘T’ and headed up a much longer corridor. *There seems to be an abundance of Starfleet officers here, though. At least I will not have difficulty blending in with the local populace.*

Several minutes later, at the far end of a narrower and much less traveled corridor, she arrived at a door labeled “SECURITY CONTROL CENTER: PUBLIC ACCESS” and went inside to find herself in a large public waiting area, at the far end of which a closed off desk officer’s station was located, protected from possible assault by a thick transparent aluminum window and currently manned by a young red-shirted ensign. Only a few of the chairs in the waiting area were occupied and the people sitting in them appeared to be waiting for their turn to be assisted, so she walked straight to the desk and cleared her throat, hoping that her guise as an Intelligence officer would allow her to avoid having to wait with them.

She cleared her throat a second time and the ensign finally looked up at her with an expression on his face that told her he was bored and probably did not want to be there, let alone be bothered by her or anyone else. “Yes, may I help you, Lieutenant?” he asked in the monotone voice of long-exercised routine.

“Lieutenant T’Lon, Starfleet Intelligence,” she told him. “I need to see the officer in charge of security.”

“Of course you do,” the ensign commented as he reached over to one side and pressed a yellow button on the small panel beside him. “Commander, there’s a lieutenant claiming to be from Starfleet Intel out front. She says she needs to see you.”

“*Send her in,*” someone responded—the commander, she assumed.

The ensign pressed another button on the panel and a *BEEP* sounded from the panel. Then something to D’Vahn’s right clicked and she looked to see a previously hidden door standing slightly ajar. “Through that door, Lieutenant,” he then told her. “To the right, down the hall, last door on your left.”

“Thank you,” she replied as she approached the door. *Commander,* she thought as she walked through and turned right as the ensign had instructed. There were only three offices off the hall, all of them on the left side. *Would I be expected to know this commanders name if I really were with Starfleet Intelligence? Possibly, if he is indeed the correct authority.*

She stopped at the last door, turned to look inside, and found a muscular looking tan-skinned man with hair as dark as her own wearing a red shirt with the rank bands of a full commander around its cuffs sitting and working behind a large desk. She struggled to read his name on the wall plate posted beside the door and could only hope that she pronounced it correctly when she asked, “Commander Gutierrez?”

“Yes,” he confirmed as he looked up at her, smiling, his voice a deep baritone that

almost seemed to rumble like thunder. “Come in, Lieutenant, come in,” he then told her, waving her in. “You’re the officer from Intel?”

“Yes, sir,” she replied as she approached his desk. Apparently, she’d gotten his name right...or at least right enough to satisfy him.

He stood up behind his desk and extended his hand—the Terran custom of greeting one another with a shaking of hands—a custom in which Vulcans generally preferred not to participate. “Chief of Port Security, Commander Jeremy Gutierrez,” he introduced himself as D’Vahn stopped in front of his desk, pronouncing his name almost exactly as she had. “What can I do for you, Lieutenant?”

Ignoring his proffered hand as she expected a Vulcan would, D’Vahn held the pair of cartridges she had brought with her from the shuttlecraft up where he could easily see them. “Lieutenant T’Lon, sir,” she told him evenly, “of Vulcan.”

“Oh, right,” Gutierrez replied, withdrawing his hand, apparently remembering at that moment how Vulcans felt about casual physical contact with others. “Sorry.”

“I have orders direct from Starfleet Command requiring the Romulan spy who posed as Ambassador Sarek be released to my custody,” she told him as she dropped her hand back to her side.

“The Romulan spy?” Gutierrez asked. “I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong place, Lieutenant. You want Confinement across town.”

“Yes...I, uh...I know,” she said, thinking quickly. “I have just arrived on planet and am seeking the fastest way there. I thought perhaps you might have access to a transporter or an efficient means of ground transportation, or...”

“Actually I do,” he told her, interrupting, “but you’d be wasting your time.”

“Why is that, sir?”

“Because, if I’m not mistaken, that spy has already been moved off world.”

“What?” she asked, barely managing to maintain her false stoicism. That was the last thing she had wanted to hear. If the agent had been relocated, what was she going to do? How was she supposed to find him? “Sir...I...”

“Hold on, Lieutenant,” he told her. “Let’s make a call and see what we can find out.” He sat back down and turned to his communications panel. D’Vahn gazed at the monitor he made his call. “Commander Wozniak, are you in your office?”

The image of another man in red, presumably Commander Wozniak, appeared on the screen. “*Right here, Jeremy,*” he acknowledged. “*What can I do for you?*”

“I have a young woman here from Starfleet Intelligence looking to take custody of that Romulan spy you were holding. He’s already gone, isn’t he?”

“*Yeah, the Endeavour took him out of here several days ago.*”

“Took him where, Commander?” D’Vahn asked the other man as her anger began to simmer. Her mission had just grown a lot more complicated and likely a lot longer as a result.

“*Sorry, Lieutenant, but I don’t have any idea where they took him,*” Wozniak replied. “*The Endeavour’s destination was classified and I didn’t have a need to know.*”

D’Vahn drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly to buy a few extra moments to think. She needed to convince these men somehow to help her in any way they could...*if* they could. Perhaps... “Their authority was forged, Commander,” she claimed.

“*Forged?*” Wozniak exclaimed, raising his voice a little bit. “*Their orders bore Vice-*

Admiral Nogura's own signature, Lieutenant."

"It bore a *forgery* of Nogura's signature, Commander," she insisted, "and you fell for it." She hadn't meant to come on quite so strong with these men, both of whom outranked her current persona, but now that she had done so, she was committed. "As a result, you released an enemy prisoner without proper authority...*wrongfully*." She turned her eyes to Gutierrez. "Close the channel...sir."

Gutierrez turned to his colleague's image—actually, D'Vahn had observed, they acted more like friends than strictly professional colleagues—and said, "I'll give you a call back later, Frank," then closed the channel as she had requested.

"For security purposes, your facility tracks all outgoing vessels to a specific distance, does it not, Commander?" she asked him quickly when he looked back up at her, before he had a chance to say anything first.

"We're a high-security facility so yes, it does," he verified. "Incoming as well."

"Excellent. Call up all the data you have on *Endeavour*'s departure. I need course and speed, and if possible the ship's warp signature." Gutierrez stared at her for several moments, and she suddenly realized that she had just given an order to a superior officer. "I apologize, Commander," she told him. "I didn't mean to give you orders. I *request* that you provide me with whatever information you can concerning the *Endeavour*'s departure."

"What do you think might happen to Commander Wozniak as a result of his honest mistake, Lieutenant?" he asked her as he turned to his computer to comply with her request.

That is not for me to decide, sir," she replied.

"Obviously it's not for you to decide, but I thought as an Intel officer you might have some idea. Maybe you've seen a similar occurrence before?"

"I am sorry, Commander," she said. "I have not."

"He's a good man, Lieutenant, and a good friend. If there's anything I can do to help him out, I'd like to do it."

"Perhaps there is," she told him, an idea coming to her suddenly as he stood up and pulled a data cartridge from his computer, which he then handed to her. "I arrived here after traveling all the way from Earth Outpost-Six aboard a standard Starfleet shuttlecraft. If you have access to a faster vessel and can loan that vessel to me for a period of time..."

"How about one of your own brand new Vulcan-class mark-eight long-range shuttles with an attached warp-sled that's capable of reaching warp four, complete with flight crew?" he asked her, almost grinning.

D'Vahn hesitated, as it took her a moment to consider how best to reply. She'd been hoping for a slightly faster shuttlecraft at best. The commander's generous offer had taken her completely by surprise. When she had finally decided how to respond—how to accept his offer like a Vulcan, without seeming too eager or anxious—she said, "I believe such a vehicle would meet my needs quite sufficiently, Commander. Thank you."

"Launch pad sixteen as soon as you're ready," he told her. "The crew should be ready and waiting by the time you get there."

"Thank you, Commander. I can give them two hours." She turned to leave. "I need to purchase some additional clothing before I depart."

* * * * *

Captain's Log, stardate 2751.8. With Endeavour having been well on her way to her assigned patrol sector so far from our own, it took the Enterprise nearly three days at maximum warp to reach the rendezvous point. We've been waiting here for nearly five hours now, and so far have seen no sign of the Endeavour, which should have arrived before we did. I don't like it.

"It's like Ambassador Sarek's diplomatic shuttle all over again," Kirk remarked under his breath.

"Highly unlikely, Captain," Spock opined from the science station, apparently having overheard Kirk's remark, which didn't really surprise him, of course. "Our current position is farther away from the Klingon and Romulan neutral zone borders than this vessel has ever travelled and the *Endeavour* is doubling back from even farther away to rendezvous with us. The chances that the Klingons or the Romulans might have attacked her are negligible."

"That doesn't mean *no one* could have attacked them, Mister Spock," Doctor McCoy argued from his place standing beside the captain. "Gods know the Klingons and Romulans aren't the *only* hostiles we've ever met out here. There could be dozens of them in this region that we've never even heard of yet."

"I have something on scanners, Captain," Lieutenant Kyle said from the helm, where he was peering into the tactical scope. "Extreme range, almost dead ahead."

"Verified, Captain," Spock added, peering into his station's scope as well. "Definitely a space vessel, configuration..." He paused for a brief moment, then straightened and looked over at Kirk. "It's the Starship *Endeavour*, Captain. She has just dropped out of warp and is approaching at standard approach velocity."

"Confirmed, sir," Lieutenant Uhura added from communications. "Captain MacLeod is hailing us."

"On screen, Lieutenant," Kirk directed.

An image of Captain MacLeod sitting straight in his bridge's center seat appeared on the screen. "*Captain Kirk*," he greeted with a friendly nod.

"Captain MacLeod," Kirk returned. "I was starting to get worried."

"Sorry about being a little late, Jim. We stopped along the way long enough to run a few quick preliminary scans of a planet we found emitting some low-level energy signatures. Looks like it's worth further study, so we're heading back there right after we're done here."

"I know well that feeling that you're feeling, Chris, so I won't hold you up any longer than I have to," Kirk told him, grinning, despite feeling a little irritated by his colleague's seemingly indifferent attitude. "Transmit the information Admiral Nogura specified directly to my navigation subsystems computer and we'll be on our way."

MacLeod glanced back over his right shoulder toward his comm. officer and nodded, then looked back at Kirk and said, "On its way, Jim. Tight beam and scramble."

"Thank you."

"Got it, Captain," Ensign Kirk reported from the navigation subsystems station.

"Thank you, Ensign," the captain replied, glancing over at him. Then he turned back

to MacLeod and said, "Receipt confirmed, Chris."

"Good luck, Jim," MacLeod replied. "I hope you find the bastards and make them pay dearly for what they did."

"Good luck to you and your crew as well," Kirk returned. "Congratulations once more on being selected as captain of the *Endeavour*. May the wind be at your backs. Kirk out."

McCoy eyed Kirk with disapproval as the image of the *Endeavour* hanging in space ahead of them replaced that of her captain. "You know, Jim, every time you quote that to someone, something bad happens. It's like you're putting a hex on them or something."

"Come now, Bones," Kirk said with a mischievous smirk. "You of all people couldn't possibly be that superstitious."

"After everything we've seen out here over the years, don't bet on it."

Kirk glanced up at the viewscreen and watched while the *Endeavour* turned away and then jumped to warp. Then he stood up and walked over to his nephew. "Let's take a look at what we've got, Ensign."

"Aye, sir," Peter acknowledged. "Completing decryption sequence now."

Kirk stopped behind his nephew's left shoulder—he made a conscious decision *not* to place a comforting hand on the young man's shoulder—while Spock joined them and stopped behind his right. Both senior officers then looked up at the overhead monitor when a graphic representation of planet Tantalus-V appeared on the screen along with a readout of its basic physical characteristics. "Tantalus-Five," Kirk muttered, recognizing the double-ringed world with oceans that shone nearly as brown as its barren, rocky land masses immediately.

"The penal colony," Spock added, pointing it out as, "A somewhat obvious choice of locations, Captain."

"But not necessarily a bad one, Mister Spock," the captain countered. "They have the facilities to keep the spy confined securely under twenty-four hour guard, while at the same time seeming *such* an obvious a choice that anyone who might want to find him would likely disregard it as too obvious."

"Perhaps," Spock acquiesced after considering that for a moment.

"Like hiding him in plain sight," Peter interjected.

"Exactly, Ensign," McCoy affirmed as he stepped up behind them. "That's tactic has proven successful before. Kodos comes to mind," he added, regretting having mentioned that man's name as soon as it passed his lips. Then he turned to the captain and quickly continued, "What concerns me, Jim, is what happened the *last* time we paid the Tantalus-Five colony a visit. If that spy somehow gains access to that neural neutralizer contraption..."

"He can't," Kirk told him. "Doctor Van Gelder made dismantling and destroying that thing his top priority after we left, plans and blueprints included." He dropped his gaze to Peter and asked, "Does the data we just received indicate whether or not Doctor Van Gelder is still on staff there?"

Peter checked, then replied, "Yes, sir. Doctor Simon Van Gelder is listed as the senior administrator of the facility."

"Excellent," Kirk replied, patting his nephew on the shoulder. "He knows us. Should make things a little easier when we get there." He turned and walked back to the center seat with McCoy on his heels, "Ensign Isel," he called to the Deltan woman currently manning the navigation station. "Plot a course to Tantalus-Five."

“Yes, sir.”

Kirk took his seat, then turned to McCoy. “Bones, I want you personally to contact Doctor Van Gelder when we arrive. Tell him we’re coming by for another routine visit. Tell him to have his annual reports ready for review, etcetera. Make the whole thing sound as completely routine as you can.”

“Will do, Jim.”

“Mister Kyle,” Kirk said, turning to the helmsman as McCoy headed for the turbolift, “ahead warp factor six.”

“Warp factor six, aye, sir,” Kyle acknowledged.

* * * * *

“Stay with them,” the senior agent aboard the small stealth vessel ordered. “If we lose them we might never find them again.”

“Engaging warp,” the pilot replied. “We won’t lose them.”

CHAPTER 7

The *Vulcan*-class long-range shuttle *Kimble* had proven to be all that D’Vahn could have hoped for and more—luxurious compared to the shuttlecraft aboard which Commander Tal had sent her off. The main passenger cabin, which took up roughly half of the vessel’s total interior space if not more, felt more like a library lounge than it did the cabin of a space vessel. It was furnished with two small circular dining tables, each of which had four chairs spaced equally around its perimeter, a pair of soft three-person couches, one against the port bulkhead, the other against the starboard, both facing inward, and a number of forward-facing cushioned chairs that reclined. A shared stateroom to the starboard-aft housed several lockers and bunks for passengers’ use, while a smaller stateroom to port-aft served as crew quarters for the shuttle’s commander and the flight crew. A galley to the port-bow and the bathroom, to which the Terrans referred as ‘the head,’ to starboard-bow flanked the small flight deck, the double-doors to which were centered between them, directly opposite the airlock.

Having dressed in one of the civilian outfits she had purchased back on Parliament for her journey—today’s choice, a steel-blue dress with black trim and a pair of matching knee boots that she particularly liked—D’Vahn held her tablet down at her side as she took her next cup of tea out of one of the galley’s half dozen food dispensers. As the only passenger aboard, she did not have to worry that someone might take a peek at the screen to see what she was reading or watching, but she made sure to hold its screen against her hip anyway. After all, who knew how many hidden surveillance cameras there might have been installed aboard? She had tried a variety of Terran and Vulcan teas with her meals since leaving Parliament. None of them had tasted bad, but she had found that she enjoyed the Vulcan teas best...which made sense, she supposed.

Five possible destinations along Endeavour’s course, she thought as she blew gently across the steaming dark surface of whatever Vulcan concoction the computer had seen fit to select for her this time. *Five!* She sipped her tea, found it a little spicy for her taste but still quite palatable, then lifted her tablet to resume reading as she turned to leave the galley. *May the Fates prevent me from having to search all five of these worlds*, she pleaded.

Though she could have sat anywhere in the cabin she wished or even returned to the stateroom to stretch out on her bunk while she worked, simply to add variety if for no other reason, she instead returned to the one recliner that she had claimed as hers for the duration—the one sitting back against the crew stateroom’s forward wall to the right of the door, toward the vessel’s center. She set her cup down in the holder on the chair’s arm and sat down, then resumed reading about the five worlds that had been identified as meeting all of the search parameters she had entered.

Exo-Three, she began with. *Cold. Dangerously so. Frozen across most of the surface. Barren. Devoid of all plant and animal life. Completely inhospitable. Not a very likely place to hide anyone.*

What is this? she wondered, moving to the next world on the list. *Miri’s Planet? A world owned by a single individual? What are ‘onlies?’ A world populated by centuries-old children? Size...physical composition...even its geography appears to be virtually identical to the Terran home world in every way? How can such a thing be possible? The odds against*

parallel formation and development must be...astronomical. She took a sip of her spicy tea—still very hot—then continued. *Federation teachers...advisors...temporary guardians, all of them there to help the children rebuild their civilization.* She shook her head. *No, they would not have taken him there.*

She took another sip, then set her cup back in the holder and moved on to the third world on the list. *Tantalus-Five. A penal colony. A far more appropriate location, and so a far more obvious choice.* She looked up from her tablet and considered, *Perhaps too obvious a choice. Too logical. They are smarter than that. They would not choose such an obvious location. Then again, they might have anticipated that we would reach that conclusion and taken him there after all.*

She moved to the last two worlds on her list, just to see if one of them might have been a more likely choice. *Planet Q or nearby Cygnia Minor. Barely within the search cone. Both settled and thriving. Possible, but neither as likely a choice as the Tantalus-Five penal colony. He would pose a potential danger to the populations there.* She took another sip and then a full mouthful of her tea as she looked up from her tablet once more. *Overly obvious or not, this Tantalus-Five penal colony does seem to be the most likely choice...the safest and most logical option. But how can I be sure?*

She looked up, startled when the crew cabin door suddenly slid open and the fourth member of the shuttle's crew emerged from inside pulling his red Starfleet shirt down into place as he walked passed her. "Already?" she asked him. Then, when he stopped and looked back at her, she added, "You only went to bed three hours ago."

"Flight officer called me forward," he told her, adding as he headed toward the closed flight deck doors, "They're picking something up on the scanners."

D'Vahn leaned to her left and watched him tap his access code into the panel beside the doors, then repeated the sequence of numbers over and over again in her mind as the doors opened for him and he went inside until she had committed it to memory. *Something on scanners?* she reflected, concluding, *Something suspicious or perhaps quite important if they called him forward to investigate.* She took another drink of her tea and then set it and her tablet aside and stood up. *I must keep myself aware of what is happening at all times.*

She walked up to the flight deck doors as they finished closing behind the crewman, turned an ear to them, and leaned in close to listen. They had just detected a vessel—a large vessel, approaching fast from...from starboard-aft. There was plenty of distance—no danger of collision as the vessel's present course indicated that it would overtake and pass the shuttle several thousand kilometers away. It was maintaining a non-aggressive posture. No change in course. Readings indicated it was a Federation vessel, its beacon indicating Starfleet. It was a starship. It was the Starship...

D'Vahn straightened, backed away from the door and stared at it, no longer listening. *The Enterprise. Kirk!* she barked in her mind. *Spock!* She sneered. *The Fates have given me an opportunity to exact vengeance.*

The doors opened suddenly, surprising D'Vahn, who jumped another step backwards and off to one side as the redshirted crewman exited the flight deck.

"Wow," the man exclaimed, grinning at her with amusement. "I didn't know Vulcans could be so easily startled."

"It has been known to happen on infrequent occasions," she told him, trying to sound

as Vulcan as she could.

“Did you need something, Lieutenant?” he then inquired.

“I was...curious,” she told him, “about what we picked up on scanners. I was about to inquire when you came out.” She turned and walked with him toward the crew cabin.

“The Starship *Enterprise*,” he replied, pointing back over his shoulder with his thumb as they walked. “They only called me forward because it was coming up on us so fast and they hadn’t identified it yet.”

“What is the *Enterprise*’s destination?” she inquired when he stopped in front of the crew cabin door and looked at her.

“Starships don’t normally tell us shuttle-jockeys such things, Lieutenant,” he told her, “but judging from their course my guess is Tantalus-Five.”

The penal colony. So, her target was likely being held there after all. “Tantalus-Five lies within our search cone and is most likely where the subject of my search will be found,” she told him. “Assuming the *Enterprise* is, in fact, heading there, how many hours ahead of us will they arrive?”

“Many,” he answered plainly. “At least a day and a half. Maybe two days. They sailed by at warp six. The best *we* can do is warp four.”

“Thank you,” she said as he pressed the button beside the door.

“You’re welcome,” he replied as the door started to open.

She watched him walk into the cabin and then waited while the door closed behind him, then returned to her recliner. *A day and a half*, she reflected. *Maybe two full days*. She picked up her tea. *He is there, at Tantalus-Five. I know it. I can feel it*. She downed the last of her now lukewarm tea, then got up and headed to the flight deck doors again, teacup in hand. *I cannot risk allowing the Enterprise to possibly relocate him again before I have a chance to break him out and take him home. Somehow, I must get aboard the Enterprise*. She pressed the ‘call’ button on the panel beside the doors.

“Yes?” the commander asked.

“Please set course for Tantalus-Five, Commander,” she said. “Best possible speed.”

“You got it, Lieutenant.”

We could contact the Enterprise—have them beam me aboard, D’Vahn thought as she walked into the galley. *But Kirk would likely want an explanation, and rightfully so*. She put her cup in the washer/sanitizer and turned it on, then leaned back against the counter. *What would I tell him? What might he consider to be a reasonable explanation for my presence? He is certainly no fool, this Captain James T. Kirk, commander of the Starship Enterprise. He deceived Dion after all—defeated her soundly in a game of espionage. Him and that Vulcan pet of his. He will not be so easily fooled*. She looked over at the silverware drawer. *No*, she concluded. *If I am to make my way aboard without suspicion, I will have to take more drastic action*. She stepped over to the drawer and opened it. As always, several forks, spoons, butter knives, and a few very sharp knives lay waiting neatly arranged inside for whomever might need them. *Regrettable, but necessary*.

She took one of the sharp knives out of the drawer and examined it closely. Made for cutting food, its blade had only one sharp edge, the tip of which curved in only one direction. That would throw off the balance and make throwing it true more difficult. Its point was very sharp, however, so if she did manage a good throw it would cut deep. At least, it should. She

closed the drawer, palmed the handle in her right hand and held the knife down at her side with its blade up behind her wrist and forearm, and then left the galley.

These officers are enemy soldiers, she reminded herself as she approached the crew cabin door once more. She reached up and pressed the button and was a little surprised when it slid open. She had thought the crewman would have locked it. She stood there and gazed at him for a moment. He had stripped down to his black briefs and looked about to climb into one of the four bunks, but then looked back at her with surprise instead...and with interest as well, if she read her Terran men correctly.

“What are you doing, Lieutenant?” he asked her, wearing what to her appeared to be a somewhat amorous smile on his face.

She could use that...if she was right. If she had not completely misread his expression. She took the chance—stepped forward into the cabin, smiling slightly, slipped her free hand around the front of her thigh and pushed her skirt up, just a little bit, just enough to draw his attention to her legs. “I have something for you,” she told him.

“You do?” he asked her, smiling as his gaze fell.

The door closed behind her as the crewman took a step or two toward her, obviously quite interested to find out what she had for him. Unfortunately for him, he was going to be quite disappointed. D’Vahn hurled the knife and it buried itself deep near the center of his throat—not a bad result at all, considering. He grabbed his throat with both hands and reeled back, his eyes wide with terror. He tried to scream but only managed to gurgle as his oddly red blood flowed out over his hands and started painting the deck. He fell back onto the bunk behind him, still gurgling. D’Vahn rushed forward and climbed over him, straddled his torso, knees on the mattress, and then looked him in the eye as she grasped the hilt of the knife. “I am sorry,” she told him, “but it is necessary.” She pulled the knife from his throat, cutting the rest of the way through his artery in the process, then looked off to the side and spied a small phaser locker mounted on the wall.

She climbed off of the dying man and stepped over to the locker, opened it, and took out one of the five type-II phasers it contained. *This will make things easier.*

She went to the door, pressed the button to open it, glanced back at the dying man once more—probably *dead* man by now—and then exited the crew cabin and returned to the flight deck doors. She punched the crewman’s access code into the panel, then stood with her hands down at her sides and slightly behind her, hiding her weapons from view as the doors opened for her. On the flight deck, the gold-shirted flight officer, a dark-skinned commander, stood centered behind the like uniformed helmsman and navigator. No doubt having heard the doors open behind him, he looked back over his shoulder at her and, obviously annoyed, demanded to know, “How the hell did you open those doors?” Then, when she didn’t answer him, he turned and stepped up to her and asked her, “Did you need something, Lieutenant?”

D’Vahn lunged at him and rammed the knife up under his ribs into where her studies had told her his heart should be, doubling him over with a grunt as his eyes grew wide with shock. She pulled the blade free again and he dropped to his knees as she pushed her way past him, already aiming her phaser at the navigator, who, like the helmsman, had looked back to see what was happening and had been shocked by what he found. She fired, stunning him as the helmsman leapt out of his chair, then turned on the charging helmsman too late to shoot him as well but managed to knock him back into his chair with a lightning-fast punch

to his throat, almost cutting it in the process.

She lowered her phaser partway when the helmsman chose to stay in his chair rather than attack her again, then stepped forward and held the tip of the knife to his right cheek, just beneath his eye, and asked him, “Are we on course for Tantalus?”

“That’s what you requested, isn’t it?” he asked her in return, gagging and coughing while he tried not to move, his voice strained as he tried to start breathing normally again. Then, when she moved in a little closer, he asked her, “What the hell are you doing?”

She withdrew the knife, but then pointed her phaser directly at his head. “Are we on course for Tantalus or are we not?”

“Yes!” he shouted. “We are!”

She lowered her phaser again and backed off. “Program the shuttle to separate from the warp sled in ten minutes and set the sled to self-destruct just as the shuttle drops out of the warp field.”

“What? No! I refuse!”

D’Vahn leaned in again and pressed the tip of her phaser against his right temple. “Do you have a family to mourn your passing after you have gone?” she asked him.

The helmsman grabbed her wrist and forearm suddenly with both hands and twisted hard, turning her phaser away from his head. She fired unintentionally, only briefly, striking the left edge of the main viewscreen, which sparked and smoked, then punched him hard in his left temple, once more nearly cutting him with the knife, knocking the fight right out of him and leaving him slumping over his console, still conscious but obviously in pain.

“Are you ready to cooperate now?” she asked him.

“All right!” he shouted, which appeared to cause him more pain. “All right,” he repeated more quietly. He sat up, adjusted himself in his chair, and then started programming the system, presumably as she had instructed.

“If you try anything contrary to my instructions, I will kill you,” she warned him.

“Since when do Vulcan Starfleet officers hijack vessels and murder their crews?” he asked her while he completed his task.

“How much time will pass after separation before the warp sled detonates?” she asked him, ignoring his question.

“Four to five seconds!” he replied angrily.

“We will be safely clear by that time?”

“Barely!” He looked up at her and demanded to know, “Why are you doing this? Why did you kill my commanding officer? What do you hope to gain by destroying the warp sled and stranding us out here in deep space? I don’t understand!”

“You are not required to understand,” she told him. “You are only required to follow my instructions. Is the auto-distress signal online?” She thrust the phaser against the back of his head and shouted, “*Do not touch it!*” when he reached out toward the indicator light that showed the auto-distress was, in fact, online.

“I wasn’t going to touch it!” he shouted back at her. “I was just going to point it out!”

“All right. Then...thank you.” He looked up at her as she backed off again. She fired, stunning him, then left the flight deck and headed back to the crew cabin again. *Now, my red-shirted friend*, she thought as she walked in. *Unfortunately for you, you were on duty as well when the tragedy occurred.* She started lifting the dead crewman’s body up off of the bunk in

the same manner as she had seen Rihannsu ground troops carry their fallen comrades off of the battlefield in academy training vids, then sighed with disappointment when his red blood started running down over her outfit. She had really liked that outfit. “Let us go, Terran,” she muttered. “It is time for you to make yourself useful once more.”

She slung the dead crewman across her shoulders and then stripped the blood-soaked blankets off of the bunk, then carried both burdens out as more red blood poured down over her clothes. “You are bleeding profusely on me, Terran,” she told the dead man as she carried him toward the flight deck. “But you are still of value to me.” She stopped at the flight deck doors and entered the man’s access code again, then dropped his body across the threshold when the doors parted, jamming them open. “You see? Still useful.”

She threw the bloody blankets into the flight deck and then examined her clothing more closely. He had bled on her even more profusely than she had first realized. She started to undress as she turned and walked toward the passenger cabin.

The navigator moaned quietly and began to stir. He sat up slowly, rubbing his chest and then clutching his head in his hands. He knew this feeling all too well. He’d been stunned by phaser before, in training back at the academy. He shook off the cobwebs and then looked over at the helmsman, saw him sitting there in his seat, slumped over his console. “Carl?” He looked back over his shoulder to find his other two crewmates lying in a pool of blood on the deck, both of them looking very dead. “Oh my God,” he whispered under his breath.

He reached into the small compartment in the bulkhead to his right, wondering, *What the hell is going on here?* as he pulled out a type-II phaser. He checked the charge to ensure it was full, then got up from his station and looked down at his dead crewmates, cringing as he moved out from behind his console. *Damn!*

He paused for a moment to listen, then peered out through the partially opened doors into the passenger cabin. *Where is she?*, he wondered. He stepped back and reached down to the helmsman, checked the side of his throat for a pulse, and was filled with relief to find one. Then he looked out through the doors again. *I have to find her*, he told himself. He stepped toward the doors, being careful not to step on his dead crewmates. *I have to stop her.*

He moved forward. A phaser whined and the beam struck him square in the center of his chest and knocked him back, stumbling over his crewmates. He felt the impact of his back against the flight console, then heard his own phaser hit the deck as everything turned black.

D’Vahn held her phaser on the navigator as she approached the flight deck until she felt sure he was unconscious again. She’d changed into her Starfleet uniform and brought her bloodied outfit out with her. She threw it onto the flight deck, then braced herself against the doors and asked, “Computer, time to separation?”

“Five seconds,” the computer replied. “Four...”

“Activate auto-distress two seconds after separation.”

“Acknowledged. Two...one...”

D’Vahn felt a slight jolt, and all she could do was wait while the distance between the *Kimble* and the warp sled grew, hopefully very fast. “Auto-distress signal activated.” She felt a second jolt and then suddenly came up off of her feet and flew sideways through the air as the warp sled exploded—the cause could not have been anything else—buffeting the *Kimble*

an instant before it dropped violently out of warp. She slammed hard into the port bulkhead and fell onto the couch, then rolled off and tumbled across the deck until she hit the base of the crew cabin wall with a hard *THUD*.

It was over, she realized a moment later. The shuttle...and she herself...had survived...so far. She rose up onto one knee, paused for a moment to collect herself and ensure that she wasn't significantly injured, then stood up and looked around. The tables and chairs that had supposedly been bolted to the deck had come loose, and there were galley supplies and other odds and ends of stuff strewn everywhere. *Where is my phaser?* she wondered.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Uhura turned her chair almost completely around and faced the captain. "Captain Kirk, I'm picking up a Starfleet distress signal from astern," she informed him.

Kirk looked over at Spock at the science station to find the Vulcan already moving to his scope. "Matter-antimatter detonation astern, sir," he reported as he interpreted his initial readings. "That warp-shuttle we detected a short time ago appears to have exploded."

"All stop, Mister Kyle," Kirk ordered as he stood up quickly. Then he walked over to the railing behind Spock's station and asked, "Is there anything left of it, Spock?"

"Detecting no wreckage of significant size at this time, Captain," the first officer replied. "The vessel appears to have been almost entirely vaporized. Reading minute traces of debris only, consistent with the vessel's design."

Kirk turned his eyes to Uhura, but didn't have to ask. "I'm still receiving the distress signal, sir," she reported.

"The shuttle is obviously still out there somewhere, Spock," Kirk concluded.

"Indeed it is, sir," Spock verified. "Picking it up now. It is adrift and apparently out of control. Minor damage to its bow and lower hull, but it appears to be essentially intact." He paused for a moment, then added, "Life signs, Captain. Three persons, two likely injured."

Kirk returned to the center seat. "Ensign Isel, plot an intercept course."

"Yes, sir," the navigator acknowledged.

"Mister Kyle, as quickly as you can get us there."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman acknowledged as well.

* * * * *

"What do you want to do?" the junior agent aboard the small stealth vessel asked his superior as they watched the *Enterprise* double back and soar past in the other direction.

"They were on course for the Tantalus-Five Penal Colony before they stopped," the senior agent pointed out. "That *must* be where they're holding him."

"Then we keep going, based on that assumption?"

"We keep going."

CHAPTER 8

D’Vahn rose up off of her hands and knees, stood in front of the starboard couch—one of the few pieces of furniture that was still bolted down—and brushed herself off, but so far all of her efforts to find her phaser had proving futile. She had lost it when the shuttle suddenly pitched violently and threw her across the cabin and had been looking for it for the past several minutes since she recovered and determined that she was not seriously injured. *Where could it have gone?* she asked herself for perhaps the dozenth time. She had searched everywhere for it—all over the cabin, the flight deck, even in the galley when she saw that its door had flown open—but she still had not found it. She *had* to find it. Without her phaser there was no way she was going to be able to... The solution hit her suddenly and could not have been more obvious. Yes, she needed a phaser. *So why not just go get another one?* Of course. The small weapons locker from where she had pulled the first one had had four more inside. How incredibly and unforgivably stupid of her it was to have forgotten that.

Stupidity forgiven, she headed for the crew cabin, but as she reached up to press the button and open the door she happened to glance over at the port couch, which had broken only partially free of its deck fasteners and had spun on the one foot that remained attached to the deck and was now facing mostly aft. There, sticking out from between two of the couch’s back cushions, was her phaser’s handgrip and the back portion of its body. The weapon had apparently flown from her hand and caught itself there while the couch was turning. *How did I miss that?* she wondered. Then she decided that it did not matter how she had missed it. What did matter was that now she had found it.

She retrieved the phaser and adjusted its power setting as she walked back toward the flight deck. She set it to increase slowly and steadily to overload, locked it, and then tossed it through the doorway onto the flight deck when it began to hum. The hum grew to a whir, the whir grew to a whine, and the whine grew steadily louder and higher in pitch. She backed up against the bulkhead a few feet to the side of the flight deck doors where the blast would miss her, she hoped, turned her face away, closed her eyes, and placed her hands tightly over her ears. Barely five seconds later by her count the phaser detonated and D’Vahn felt the searing heat on her back and her buttocks and her legs when the blast erupted violently through the doorway and threw her across the cabin.

* * * * *

“Captain, I just read a large energy spike aboard the shuttle,” Spock reported, peering into his scope, drawing both Kirk’s and McCoy’s attention to himself. “There appears to have been an explosion on or near the flight deck.” He made some adjustments to his instruments, then added, “Hull integrity does not appear to have been compromised, however I am now reading the life signs of only a single survivor, and they are somewhat erratic. I believe he or she may be seriously injured, sir. Perhaps critically.”

Kirk punched the ‘call’ button on the arm of his chair. “Kirk to transporter room.”

“Transporter room two here, Captain,” the operator on duty responded.

“Lock onto the sole life signs aboard that shuttle out there and transport that person aboard now.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk looked McCoy in the eye as he stood up. “Bones...”

“On my way, Jim,” the doctor told him, knowing exactly what the captain had been going to say. “I’ll alert my sickbay on the way.”

Kirk stepped around the doctor and over to the railing behind the engineering station, where Commander Scott was hovering over one of his engineering lieutenants seated at that station. “Scotty, head down to the hangar deck,” he told him as McCoy made his way to the turbolift. “As soon as Spock advises you it’s safe, tractor that shuttle into the bay. I want to know exactly what happened.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty replied as he hurried to join McCoy, who, having overheard the instructions the captain was giving him, was holding the lift doors open for him.

“Full inspection, Scotty,” Kirk specified as the engineer turned inside the lift to face forward. “Both engineering *and* forensic. Your people and Chekov’s.”

“Aye, sir,” Scotty replied as the lift doors swished closed in front of him.

A little while later, after Kirk had received reports that the survivor had been beamed aboard and taken directly to sickbay and that the shuttle had been tractored safely into the hangar bay, Kirk headed first to sickbay, hoping to question the survivor. When he arrived, one of the nurses on duty informed him that Doctor McCoy was still examining her—so the survivor was a woman. He thanked the nurse and then headed to the examining room, where he found McCoy and another nurse—Fontana was it?—tending to an attractive young Vulcan woman who lay back on the diagnostic bed partially on her left side, holding the blanket up over her apparently bare torso. As he moved in closer he saw that they were treating what appeared to be first and second-degree burns that stretched from her right arm and shoulder, down the right side of her back and past her hip to the back of her leg. It appeared as though some of her hair on the right side of her head had been burned away as well. The partially burned remnants of a command-gold uniform with lieutenant’s bands around the cuffs were thrown over a chair off to the side—obviously hers, so whoever she was, she was Starfleet.

“You couldn’t wait ten more minutes, Jim?” McCoy asked him as he pumped a hypo full of something red into his patient’s left shoulder.

“Got one of those feelings, Bones,” Kirk replied as he met the young woman’s blue-eyed gaze. She seemed to be glaring at him rather than just looking at him—odd for a Vulcan to be sure, but probably just a result of the incredible pain she must have been suffering. Her burns looked pretty severe, especially those on her leg.

“When do you ever *not* have one of those feelings?” the doctor then asked him. Nurse Fontana had just finished spraying what was probably an antiseptic or some kind of dermal regenerator over the woman’s shoulder and upper back and took a small step to her right, out of Kirk’s way, to treat her lower back, hip, and leg as he stepped up to the side of the bed. McCoy then introduced them. “Captain Kirk, Lieutenant T’Lon, Starfleet Intelligence.” He gestured to Kirk. “Lieutenant, Captain James T. Kirk, commanding officer of the *Enterprise*.”

“Lieutenant,” Kirk said, nodding to her.

"Captain Kirk," she replied, her glare softening. "Thank you for the rescue."

"You're welcome." He walked around and joined McCoy on the other side of the bed where she wouldn't have to turn her head so far to see him...and where he could better honor her Vulcan sense of modesty. Then he asked her, "How are you feeling?"

"Much better, Captain," she told him. "My injuries were quite painful, but I suppose it could have been much worse. Doctor McCoy and Nurse Fontana have relieved that pain quite significantly. They are doing an excellent job."

"Good, because I have some questions for you, if you feel up to answering them."

"I will do my best, sir."

"You say you're with Starfleet Intelligence?" he began.

"Yes, sir," she confirmed. "Fairly newly assigned, but active in the field."

"May I ask what you're doing out here? Where you were going?"

"I was enroute to the Tantalus-Five Penal Colony to interview the Romulan spy who was taken there from Parliament," she replied. "The one who posed as Ambassador Sarek."

"What makes you think he's there, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked her curiously.

She stared at him silently for a few moments, then reminded him, "I am a Starfleet Intelligence officer, Captain. I *know* he is there because I have a *need* to know."

"I was under the impression *no one* knew," Kirk countered.

"*Almost* no one, sir," she clarified. "A very few of us, and certainly you are aware the penal colony administrators know."

Kirk grinned slightly. "A very logical point, Lieutenant."

"She's a Vulcan all right," McCoy remarked, rolling his eyes.

"Just so happens we're on course to Tantalus-Five ourselves," Kirk told her. "We'll be there in a few hours."

"Then perhaps you will not mind taking me there with you, sir. I appear to have lost my prior means of transportation."

"Yup. All Vulcan," McCoy emphasized.

"*Scott to Captain Kirk*," the chief engineer called over the intercom.

Kirk stepped over to the desk beside the door through which he'd entered and pressed the comm. button. "Kirk here," he answered.

"*I'm afraid we have need o' medical down here, sir*," Scotty told him, his tone filled with what sounded to Kirk like sorrow or regret. "*We found pockets of humanoid remains onboard. Four souls...I think. There's no' a lot left o' them, sir.*"

Kirk looked over at McCoy, who told him, "I'll send a team, Jim."

"They're on their way, Scotty," Kirk informed the engineer. "Anything else?"

"*Not yet, sir. We're just gettin' started on the inside.*"

"All right. Keep me informed. Kirk out." He closed the channel, then returned to the lieutenant's side—Nurse Fontana's side, prompting the lieutenant to pull the blanket a little farther over her bare hip. "As soon as you're well enough to interview the spy, Lieutenant, I'll be sitting in with you."

"I am sorry, Captain, I cannot allow that," she told him. "My orders..."

"...are hereby suspended, temporarily, so that I can comply with *my* orders. Either that or we can interview him together. Your choice, Lieutenant."

"You cannot do that, sir."

“Can’t I?”

She stared at him for another few silent moments, then finally acquiesced. “Very well, Captain,” she said. “You do seem to have me at...something of a disadvantage.”

Kirk grinned again. “Indeed I do, Lieutenant.”

“Medical team is on its way to the hangar, Jim,” McCoy told him as he returned to the side of the bed.

“Are you going to need to hold Lieutenant T’Lon here much longer, Bones?”

“Well,” he began, locking eyes with the Vulcan, “Nurse Fontana should be finishing up in the next few minutes and I still need to conduct a thorough examination before I can be sure, but judging by her overall appearance my guess is she’ll be well enough to be released after that, once we’ve gotten her something to wear, of course.”

“All right. I’ll have some guest quarters prepared for her and let you know where to take her.” Kirk turned and headed for the exit. “Make that physical exam a thorough one, Bones. I don’t want her suffering any complications later.”

“*Of course* it’ll be a thorough one,” an annoyed McCoy muttered after Kirk had left. “What am I, new here?”

A few hours later, as the *Enterprise* approached planet Tantalus-V, Lieutenant Uhura turned and looked back over her shoulder at Kirk and reported, “Captain, I’m receiving a live emergency transmission from the penal colony.”

“On screen, Lieutenant,” Kirk ordered.

“Aye, sir.”

Uhura switched over and the view of the distant Tantalus-V on the main viewscreen wavered, then was replaced by an image of the white-haired Doctor Simon Van Gelder, looking significantly better than he had the last time he had seen him, Kirk noted, though he still appeared a little disheveled and had a fist-sized red mark on the right side of his face. “*Responding starship,*” he called out emotionally, foregoing any sort of formal greeting, “*this is Tantalus-Five Colony Administrator Doctor Simon Van Gelder.*”

“Doctor Van Gelder, this is Captain Kirk on the *Enterprise*. We’re almost there. What is the nature of your emergency?”

“*Captain Kirk,*” the doctor parroted, obviously recognizing him. “*Excellent. A heavily armed military force just stormed through here and made off with a very high-profile inmate we were holding. I don’t know if it was a breakout and rescue or an abduction.*”

“Do you have casualties, Doctor?”

“*That’s the funny thing, Captain. They blew through here like an invading army but seemed to go out of their way to avoid hurting anyone too much at the same time. A few bumps and bruises, but nothing my staff doctors can’t handle.*”

“Do you have any need of assistance at this time?”

“*No. No, we’ll manage. But that inmate... They just took him and left.*”

“The Romulan spy,” Kirk stated.

Van Gelder gazed at him for a moment, then told him, “*I can’t confirm that, Captain, or even tell you whether or not I know to whom you’re referring.*”

“That’s all right, Doctor. I understand. Focus all your efforts on your situation down

there. We'll take care of the escaped inmate and whoever broke him out. Kirk out."

"Captain," Spock called from the science station as soon as the image of the planet returned to the main screen, "I am aware of only one military assault force that would have wanted to avoid injuring anyone while breaking the Romulan spy out of confinement."

"Yes indeed, Mister Spock," Kirk replied, knowing exactly to whom his first officer was referring. "MACOs. And some of them work for Section Thirty-one."

"Precisely."

"Scan for departing vessels, Mister Spock. Maximum range. Mister Chekov," Kirk called as his young security chief took over navigation from Isel, "plot a direct course back to Earth. Mister Kyle, engage at warp seven."

"Warp seven, aye, sir," Kyle acknowledged as he prepared.

Kirk faced around to Uhura. "Lieutenant Uhura, message to Admiral Nogura, encode and scramble."

"Ready, sir," she said.

"Subject has been extracted by force. Suspect Section Thirty-One MACOs, likely enroute home. We are searching in that direction. Message ends."

"Aye, sir. Sending."

Sometime later—prior to glancing at the chronometer, Kirk couldn't have guessed if it had been fifteen minutes or an hour—Spock was standing and peering into his scope as he had been for quite a while when he reported, "Picking up a small vessel dead ahead, Captain. Just coming to within sensor range. Constant bearing, decreasing range as we close on it. On a direct course for Earth, sir."

"What's their speed, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Warp four point seven-five."

"Mister Kyle, drop to warp four point seven-six," Kirk ordered. "I don't want to spook them."

"Aye, sir," Kyle acknowledged. "Decreasing velocity."

"Vessel appears to be of Federation design, approximately twice the size of a standard Starfleet shuttlecraft," Spock continued. "However, the majority of its hull is a non-reflective black in color and has been outfitted with manually powered ablative armor plating."

Kirk looked over at Spock. "Manually powered?"

"Confirmed, sir. Of the type commonly used in the mid-twenty-second century."

"Starfleet stopped using that armor soon after deflector shields were perfected," Kirk recalled aloud, Spock's comment conjuring up an image of the old *Columbia*-class starships that had been used in the attack on Babel in his mind. "Weapons?"

"Two low-yield phaser banks—one dorsal, one ventral."

"Life signs?"

"Fifteen individuals onboard," Spock replied. "Fourteen human, one either Vulcan or Romulan. Vessel now increasing speed to warp four point nine."

"They've seen us," Kirk concluded. "That's our army, Mister Spock. Keep your eyes on them," he said as he faced forward again. "Mister Kyle, close to within phaser range."

"Aye, sir."

“Lieutenant Uhura, open a channel.”

“Channel open, sir.”

“This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship *Enterprise* to unidentified black-hulled vessel directly ahead.” The description of their hull to leave no room for doubt in their minds that they had been spotted. “We know you just departed from Tantalus-Five. By authority of the Federation Council and Starfleet charter, you are ordered to come to a stop and stand by for routine inspection. Respond.”

“No response, Captain,” Uhura reported.

“This is Captain Kirk aboard the *Enterprise*. You are ordered to come to a complete stop and prepare to be boarded.”

“Vessel reducing speed, Captain,” Spock reported. “Changing course as well. Coming to one-seven-one mark five. They are powering phasers and... Correction. They have diverted phaser power to...” He straightened and faced the captain. “Sir, they appear to be activating a cloaking device.”

“Chekov, target engines and fire to disable.” Kirk ordered quickly. “Low-yield.”

“Aye, Keptin,” the navigator turned security chief acknowledged as his nimble fingers danced over his board. He locked and fired the *Enterprise*’s forward phasers straight ahead, but the target vessel had already moved and the twin sapphire beams didn’t hit anything. He adjusted his target lock and fired again, slightly to port, but missed once more. He adjusted the lock again and fired once more, to starboard this time, and finally hit the cloaked vessel, which then faded into view as its cloak began to fail and started tumbling.

“Cease fire,” Kirk ordered. “Tractor beam.”

Chekov slapped a tractor beam on the vessel, stopped its tumble, and was holding it securely off the starboard-bow almost before Kirk finished giving the order. Seeing this, Kirk pressed the ‘call’ button on the arm of his chair. “Kirk to hangar deck. Mister Scott.”

“*Scott here, sir,*” the chief engineer replied after a few seconds.

“We’re holding a small vessel in our tractor beam off the starboard-bow—about fifty feet in length. Do we have room to bring it aboard?”

“*I doubt it, Captain, but stand by for a moment. I’ll check to be sure.*”

“Captain, I can now confirm the non-human aboard that vessel is, in fact, Romulan.”

“How is that possible from here?” Kirk asked him, long well aware that Vulcans and Romulans were virtually identical.

“Heartbeat and respiration levels have risen considerably, demonstrating a significant increase in that individual’s fear and anxiety responses, most likely due to the realization that he is about to be taken back into custody. Were he a Vulcan, he would simply accept that his circumstances have changed and are beyond his control.”

“If you’re right, then that’s our spy, Mister Spock.”

“Very likely, Captain,” Spock agreed, “assuming, of course, that the spy was the only Romulan being held on Tantalus-Five.”

“*As I suspected, Captain,*” Scotty interjected over the still-open channel, “*we do no’ have room for that vessel on the hangar deck. No’ while we’re goin’ over the shuttle.*”

“Understood, Scotty,” Kirk replied. “We’ll hold it in the tractor beam until such time as you can make room.”

“*That may be a while, sir,*” Scotty informed him. Then he asked, “*In the meantime,*

can yeh spare a few minutes for me down here? We've made some troublin' discoveries that I'd like to fill yeh in on."

"All right, Scotty. I'll be right there. Kirk out." He closed the channel and then said, "Mister Chekov, take a security team to the transporter room and have all of the occupants of that vessel beamed aboard and confined to the brig. We'll sort them out later."

"Aye, Keptin."

Kirk stood up and turned toward Spock as Chekov headed for the turbolift and Isel returned to navigation. "Helm, best speed to Earth. Mister Spock, you have the bridge."

"Understood, Captain." He called Lieutenant Xon to the bridge as Kirk joined Chekov in the lift.

Kirk walked into the hangar bay to find the shuttle *Kimble* sitting at an odd angle near the center of the deck between the turntable and the doors, facing roughly aft, its airlock door propped open and held that way by a metal bar that someone had jammed into its track. Its tables, chairs, couches, and a number of other odds and ends had been removed and were spread out on the deck in separate groups, no doubt in accordance with whatever system Scotty and Chekov had devised. Engineers and jumpsuited technicians and a half-dozen or so of Chekov's security officers were scattered here and there taking readings, cataloguing their findings, or performing whatever other duties needed to be performed.

"Commander Scott?" Kirk called out, not seeing him anywhere.

"Right here, sir," Scotty called back to him as he emerged from the craft.

Kirk met him just outside the airlock and asked him, "You say you've made some disturbing discoveries?"

"Aye, sir," Scotty confirmed. "That second explosion Mister Spock detected? The one that happened onboard shortly after the warp sled exploded? It was definitely something on the flight deck, sir. Left a bloody mess, too...you'll forgive my choice o' words. That's where we found all the...victims."

"All of them were on the flight deck at the time?" Kirk asked him.

"Aye," Scotty confirmed. "At least, we have no' found any remains anywhere else...so far, anyway."

"That's an interesting coincidence, Mister Scott," Kirk observed. "Do you know what caused it yet?"

"Aye, sir, I do," Scotty replied, giving the captain that look that would let him know he wasn't going to like what he was about to be told. "That's why I asked yeh to come down here. It was a phaser overload, sir, and there's one phaser *missin'* from the crew cabin."

"I see," Kirk commented. "Sounds like I had better have a real heart-to-heart talk with Lieutenant T'Lon."

"Aye," Scotty agreed.

"Sickbay to Captain Kirk."

"Excuse me, Scotty." Kirk walked over to the nearest comm. panel, the one on the wall beside the doors through which he had entered.

"Sickbay to Captain Kirk," the call repeated.

Kirk punched the comm. button. "Kirk here."

"I need to see you in my office if you have another minute, Jim. I have some troubling autopsy findings for you."

More troubling findings. Great. "On my way, Bones."

Kirk walked into Doctor McCoy's office and found the doctor sitting behind his desk, chin in one hand, staring intently at his monitor. McCoy raised his tired-looking eyes to him as he approached and turned one of his visitors' chairs. "What do you have for me, Bones?" he asked as he sat down.

"I can't be a hundred percent sure, Jim," the doctor replied. "At least not yet."

"You asked me to come up here, Bones," Kirk reminded him. "You must be feeling at least *semi*-confident."

"I suppose so, Jim," McCoy unenthusiastically acquiesced. "As confident as I *can* feel at this point, at least."

"Spill it, Bones. I'll make that an order if you prefer."

"No, that won't be necessary," McCoy decided. Then he finally got to it. "Preliminary results of the autopsies on those human remains found aboard the shuttle confirm they were caught within the blast radius of an exploding hand phaser. There wasn't enough left of the two bodies found in the pilots' chairs to determine anything more than that."

"I sense a 'however' coming on."

"However...the two bodies found down on the deck weren't as badly burned, so there was a little more of them remaining for us to examine. I found evidence of possible foul play, Jim. The explosion still did a significant amount of damage, but there are definite indicators in both bodies that they might have died *before* that explosion occurred."

"How?"

"I have to emphasize it, Jim...I'm *not* a hundred percent sure yet."

"Bones..."

"The evidence indicates they were stabbed, in which case the phaser explosion might have been intentional—intended to hide the crime. One of them lost the entire front of his head and throat and most of his torso in the blast, but there's a deep, narrow puncture wound in one of the vertebra directly behind where his throat was, consistent with the impact of a sharp knife point or similar instrument. Now, it *might* just have been a stray piece of shrapnel, but in my opinion, the odds are against that."

"What about the second victim?" Kirk asked him as he started painting a picture of what might have happened aboard that shuttle in his mind.

"Burned halfway through his ribs in front, but there's an approximately inch-tall cut through the anterior right ventricle of his heart, and I found traces of melted metal in his body cavity. The lab is analyzing those samples now."

Kirk stood up, thinking, and started pacing slowly across the office. Then he turned to McCoy and asked, "You gave Lieutenant T'Lon a complete checkup when we brought her aboard. Just how closely did you examine her?"

"I know exactly where that train of thought is taking you, Jim, and I'm already way ahead of you," McCoy told him. "Doctor M'Benga is rechecking all of the data now."

"Doctor McCoy, this is Doctor M'Benga."

“Speak of the devil,” McCoy remarked as he reached for the comm. Kirk, who had resumed pacing back and forth, stopped and faced McCoy again as the doctor answered the call. “McCoy here, and I have the captain here with me. Go ahead.”

“*You were right, Doctor,*” M’Benga told him. “*Lieutenant T’Lon is a Romulan.*”

“How sure of that are you, Doctor?” Kirk asked from across the office. “What’s your margin for error?”

“*None, Captain,*” M’Benga replied confidently. “*The woman is definitely Romulan.*”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Kirk said as he approached the desk once more. “Out here.” He reached over the desk and pressed a couple of buttons on the panel. “Kirk to Chekov.”

“*Chekov here, Keptin.*”

“Mister Chekov, Lieutenant T’Lon has just been identified as a Romulan. Given that she is posing as a Vulcan, she is very likely an enemy spy. Send a security team to meet me outside her quarters immediately.”

“*Should I sound intruder alert if she’s not there, Keptin?*”

“Negative, Lieutenant. Proceed quietly...”

In her assigned quarters, having pulled on the uniform she had been given to replace the one that had been burned off of her, Sub-Lieutenant D’Vahn lay on her bunk, listening to Kirk’s communications through the system on her desk, which she had dismantled and rigged to automatically play aloud for her all internal communications initiated by him.

“*...I don’t want to alert her to the fact that we know who and what she really is.*”

CHAPTER 9

They have found me out! Sub-Lieutenant D’Vahn told herself as she sat up on the side of the bunk to pull on her boots. She had only just begun her mission—her very first covert mission, posing as an Intelligence officer in the Rihannsu peoples’ most dangerous enemy’s fleet aboard one of their warships, surrounded by literally hundreds of enemy soldiers, and already her identity had been compromised. *They are coming for me.* And she knew that if they caught her, they would execute her as an enemy spy. She did not fear death itself, but neither was she ready to die. She was going to have to call on all of her training now to avoid that fate. *This is not how things were supposed to go.*

Boots on, she stood up and started toward the door. *I must escape, but I must do so having completed my mission—having rescued our agent. I cannot return home without him. Dion’s life depends on it!* The door slid open—at least no one had locked her in. She stepped into the corridor and looked to her left and then to her right. *What a shame my revenge on Kirk and his Vulcan will have to wait for another time.* She chose at random to go right and headed down the corridor, walking at a normal, leisurely pace so as not to draw any undue attention. *I must find a way off of this...* A pair of doors opened suddenly as she passed them, drawing her startled attention. *...vessel.* She realized right away that she needed to calm down and stop being so jumpy. Thank the Fates there was no one there, and that no one had seen her jump. Her own close proximity had caused the doors to open. A real Vulcan would never have reacted that way. Had someone seen her, that person might have grown suspicious of her. Thank the Fates again that those doors opened onto a lift.

She stepped into the lift, realizing that she needed to develop a solid plan of action if she was going to have any chance of succeeding. *First, I need to find a weapon.* Then, when the lift did not move after the doors closed, she looked around for some sort of control panel but did not see one. *No buttons. How does it work?* She looked down at the roughly waist-level ring of what she had initially thought were simple safety handles, then stepped over to one of them, grabbed hold of it, and gave it a twist. A small light came on, but the lift still did not move. *Voice activated perhaps?* “Uh...armory?” she asked more than ordered. At that the lift finally started to move laterally.

The armory will likely be guarded, she told herself, as it should be. Fortunately, these Terrans are physically weak compared to us, so I will be able to easily handle any guards I might encounter. The lift slowed nearly to a stop and then started moving vertically. *As long as there are not more than two, or perhaps three at most. But the armory itself will be no doubt be secured and not easily accessed.* The lift slowed once more as before, and then started moving laterally again. *What security measures will I find in place there, I wonder? And how will I defeat those measures? Perhaps I can coerce the guard into letting me inside. A Rihannsu guard would die first, but a Terran...perhaps. Once armed I will make my way to a transporter room, beam to the vessel this ship is towing, and then take it. Rather, we will take it. Recovering our agent remains my first priority. Break him out, and the vessel’s pilots as well if they are there. Then we will all beam to that vessel and escape.*

Or die in the attempt.

The lift slowed, to a complete stop this time, and the doors slid open. D’Vahn drew a

deep breath and exhaled sharply, then stepped out into the corridor and looked to her right and then to her left, where a pair of doors that looked a lot heavier and sturdier than the other doors she had seen in the ship's corridors stood closed. *Were this my vessel, I would put the armory behind such doors as those.*

She approached those heavy-duty doors, but when they suddenly opened ahead of her she jumped back into the lift's alcove and pressed herself against one of the walls, out of view, she hoped, of anyone who might emerge. *I would put the armory behind such closed and locked doors as those!*

She waited for a few moments, but no one came through the doors. Nor could she hear anyone approaching...from *any* direction. She leaned out and caught a brief glimpse of the corridor beyond the doors as they closed and saw no movement inside—no personnel or shadows of personnel—just a second pair of heavy-duty doors directly ahead and possibly a regular door to the immediate left, though she couldn't be sure of that. She had barely seen the edge of whatever it was, and that only for a split second.

She approached the doors once more and once more they opened for her. *They do not even require a pass code*, she marveled. She could not believe that security could be so lax around such a sensitive facility as an armory. *Am I not in the right place?* she wondered. She passed through the doors and into the corridor. It *was* a standard door to the left. She turned to her left and that door opened for her as well. She had found the armory, she realized when she saw the notice posted on the heavy red door on her right—the armory door itself, as it turned out. She did not entirely understand everything the notice stated, but she understood enough of it to know that she had, in fact, found the facility she had been looking for. Oddly enough, there was no guard posted there. *A room filled with weapons and no guard. These Terrans are either very trustworthy or very stupid.*

She reached up to the door panel, but realized the moment she laid eyes on it and right before she touched it that there were several more buttons on that keypad than on any other she had seen anywhere else. *It does require a pass code after all*, she realized. *How can I possibly gain access if...*

The door opened suddenly and an armed security officer stopped just short of running into her as he stepped out when he saw her standing there in front of him at the last moment. He was a lieutenant, she noted as she took a single step backwards, maintaining much more control over her reaction than she had previously—an accomplishment for which she allowed herself to feel one brief moment of pride. Equal to her persona in rank if not in position.

"Can I help you with something, Lieutenant?" he asked her, looking almost as startled as she had been.

"I am sorry, Lieutenant," she told him. Then she pointed at the Starfleet Command insignia on her chest and said, "As you can see, I am only a visitor onboard this vessel. I was looking for the confinement facility. Can you tell me where it is?"

"You mean the brig?" he asked. Then he pointed back the way she had come and told her, "Down around the corner to the right, but..."

With no warning whatsoever she kicked him hard in the crotch before he ever saw it coming. He grunted in obvious pain and grabbed his groin in both hands as he dropped to his knees. She pushed down on the back of his head with her right hand and grabbed his phaser off of his hip with her left, then slammed her knee into his face, breaking his nose with a loud

and very satisfying *CRACK*, splattering red blood all over her leg in the process—unfortunate but unavoidable. She let him fall to the deck, obviously unconscious, then shot him with his own phaser, just to make sure. His body convulsed once as a result, then lay still, though he did continue to breathe.

She glanced at the weapon. She had been taught that Starfleet weapons were designed with multiple and adjustable settings. Apparently his had not been set to kill.

Armed with type-II phasers, Lieutenant Chekov and one of his new security officers, an ensign fresh out of training, had been waiting in the corridor outside the quarters to which the Romulan woman had been assigned, as ordered, for several minutes when Captain Kirk finally approached from the direction of the nearest turbolift. “Is she inside, Mister Chekov?” he asked as he drew closer.

“I don’t know, sir,” Chekov replied. “We have been standing by, waiting for you as you ordered, Keptin.” He and the ensign stepped back in opposite directions to make room as Kirk walked between them and then reached up and pressed the door buzzer.

“Lieutenant T’Lon, it’s Captain Kirk,” he announced. “May I come in? I’d like to talk to you.” When she didn’t answer after a few seconds he pressed the buzzer again. “Lieutenant T’Lon, it’s Captain Kirk. Are you in there?” He gave her a few more seconds, but then, when she failed to respond again, he moved on to plan-B. “Computer, this is a command security override order. Captain James T. Kirk, commanding officer. Open the door to the quarters at my current location.” The door slid open immediately and Kirk led Chekov and the ensign inside. “Lieutenant T’Lon, it’s Captain Kirk. Are you here?” He took a few steps toward the bedroom and looked inside, then concluded, “She’s not here.”

“Keptin, look.”

Kirk turned back to find Chekov standing behind the desk and looking down at the computer terminal, which had obviously been tampered with. He told the ensign, “Go check in the bathroom just to be sure,” then joined Chekov by the terminal, which the lieutenant had already begun examining more closely.

“Looks like she tapped into ship’s internal communications somehow, sir,” Chekov told him, “but I don’t know how to track what specifically she was after. Perhaps Lieutenant Uhura or Mister Spock...”

“She’s been listening in on us,” Kirk concluded. “She came to us covertly with a mission to complete, and now she knows that we know who she is.” He pressed the console’s ‘call’ button to call the bridge... “Kirk to...” ...but the entire panel and then the monitor as well suddenly began sparking and smoking. Kirk and Chekov both backed away quickly just as the ensign rushed out of the bathroom. “Back into the corridor!” he ordered.

“Bathroom’s empty, Captain!” the ensign informed him as they evacuated.

D’Vahn still could not believe that the armory door had stood open for so long after the security officer stepped out. She had spoken with him, fought with him briefly, and then shot him with his own weapon and knelt down at his side to check and make sure that he was completely unconscious. Only then, once she had stood up again, had she turned back to the door and found it just beginning to close, slowly enough that she had been able to grab the

officer by his arms and drag him back inside the armory at the last possible second. After all, had someone found him lying unconscious in the corridor while she was inside the armory, she very likely would have been apprehended on the spot.

Inside she had found hundreds of phaser pistols and rifles, photon grenades, and even cylinders with extendable legs that she quickly determined were portable launchers designed to fire the larger photon mortar rounds that lined much of the back wall. She found a variety of belts and harnesses as well, a healthy supply of field ration packs, and even some helmets and items of body armor that looked as though they had never been used. All in all, there were enough weapons and equipment in there to arm and outfit an entire battalion of troops.

If only she *had* an entire battalion of troops.

She fastened one of the heavier black equipment belts around her waist and adjusted it to fit, then slapped a pistol-type phaser on over her right hip, grabbed a phaser rifle out of the nearest rack, and then keyed the door open and walked right out of the armory as though she belonged there. *Back the way I came*, she reminded herself. *Down around the corner to the right, he said*. She walked through the doors, strolled past the lift that had brought her there, and approached the “T” intersection ahead, where she aimed her rifle down the short corridor to her right, as the twin doors to the left were closed.

“Attention all hands, this is Captain Kirk,” the Terran captain’s voice suddenly called out, echoing through the corridors all around her as she turned to her right, moved forward, and then found a door whose label identified at as leading into the brig. The ‘brig.’ That was what the security officer had called the confinement facility. She had found it. She had found her objective...almost. “Security alert to all decks. We have an intruder aboard.” D’Vahn passed through the doors when they opened ahead of her just as all the others had, then froze in place and raised her rifle, ready to fire on any target that might present itself, but none did. “The woman purporting herself to be the Vulcan Lieutenant T’Lon is in reality a Romulan agent and she is currently loose aboard ship.” She moved forward into the corridor that led to the cells. “She appears to be a Vulcan in her mid- to late-twenties and may be wearing a Starfleet command gold uniform bearing fleet command insignia and lieutenant rank.”

“Hey!” someone shouted from behind her.

She whirled around, saw a man in Starfleet red coming out of an office, phaser pistol in hand and pointed right at her. She fired first, mostly by instinct, and struck him square in the center of his chest.

“She may be armed and should be considered dangerous,” Kirk droned on as the man screamed and began to glow. As she watched him, he glowed brighter for a second of two and then disintegrated completely. “I say again, we have a Romulan agent loose aboard ship. Female, mid- to late-twenties, possibly wearing Starfleet command-gold with fleet command insignia and lieutenant rank.”

Captain Kirk thumbed the button on the wall panel twice, first closing the ship-wide intercom channel and then opening a single point-to-point channel. Then he called, “Kirk to bridge. Mister Spock?”

“Spock here,” the first officer’s response came after only a moment.

“Mister Spock, adjust internal sensors as needed. See if you can locate and track our

lady Romulan before she finds a way off the ship.”

“*Sensor search is already underway, Captain.*”

Of course it was. Spock was by far the most intelligent and efficient fellow officer with whom he had ever served. “Right. I’m on my way to the bridge. Kirk out.” He closed the channel, then turned back to Lieutenant Chekov. “Deploy your people as you see fit, Lieutenant, but send a backup team to the brig in case she tries to free the spy.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

D’Vahn stood before the force-field that separated the corridor into two parts—the outer portion in which she was standing, and the inner portion that curved slightly to the left as it ran between the two rows of cells. Though the barrier itself was invisible, the emitters mounted on either side of narrow doorway gave off visible yellow-white light, and she could easily hear the energy humming, which indicated to her that trying to force her way through the field, or even touching it briefly, would likely prove to be a very bad idea. She might have been significantly stronger than a Terran, physically, but she was not invincible.

Fortunately, shutting it down was simply a matter of reaching up to the panel in the wall beside it and pressing the button that looked most like the correct one. She did exactly that, and the humming instantly stopped and the emitter lights winked off.

She rushed forward—hopefully, no one would show up to reactivate the field and trap her inside—and glanced into every cell on both sides of the corridor as she made her way to the back wall, knowing that with every moment she spent on that side of the force-field threshold the chances of her being discovered and apprehended increased. Each cell housed one or two Terrans. At least, they all appeared to be Terran. Most of them were males, but there were a few females among them as well, and all of them were wearing identical four-tone black, green, and gray clothing that appeared to be combat fatigues, but with no sort of insignias to identify them. At least, none that she could see. They all looked up at her as she passed them by, but none of them spoke.

“Who are all of you?” she asked them in the dominant Terran language, the only one she had learned, stopping a little more than halfway to the wall. “Who are you people?” No one answered her. No one spoke.

She moved farther back and found her fellow Tal-Shiar agent standing calmly in the next to last cell on her right, gazing at her. It absolutely *had* to be him. He looked exactly like the Vulcan ambassador to the Terran Federation. “Jolan tru,” she said, just to be sure, and when he returned the greeting, his dark eyes shining with enthusiasm, she knew for sure that she had found her objective.

She checked the last two cells on each side and found two more Terran males, but these were dressed differently than the Terrans in the other cells, in high-collared suits of all black. They looked more like government officials than soldiers. Another thought struck her and she grew cautiously excited. Perhaps they were the pilots of that small spacecraft the *Enterprise* was currently towing in its tractor beam! The spacecraft she intended to steal! She turned to the one on her left and asked him, “You are the pilot of the small vessel that carried the Romulan agent away from Tantalus-Five?”

“I’m one of them, yes,” he replied.

She deactivated his cell's force-field, then told him rather than ask, "You will go with us and pilot your vessel to Rihannsu...that is, to *Romulan* space," she told him.

"I will not!" he defiantly refused, glaring at her with hatred. "My vessel took heavy damage, lady! It isn't going anywhere!"

D'Vahn gazed into his eyes for a moment, then shot him and turned around to face the other black-clad man, who was staring at his disintegrating comrade through horrified eyes as wide as she had ever seen, his mouth hanging open in disbelief. "You are the other pilot?" she calmly asked him. Then, when he only stared at her without answering, she deactivated his cell's force-field and raised her weapon.

"Yes! Yes!" he then shouted fearfully, throwing his hands out in front of him. "Don't shoot me, please! I'm the other pilot!"

"Can you pilot your vessel alone?"

"Yes! Yes, I can!" he told her adamantly. "I swear! She's equipped with redundant auxiliary systems and hidden backup nacelles! I can fly her anywhere you want to go!"

She stepped back a couple of paces and then told him, "Step out."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied as he complied quickly. "I'm happy to help."

"Stop." He stopped. She deactivated the force-field on her fellow Tal-Shiar agent's cell, then said to him, "Please, come with me, sir. I am here by the order of Commander Tal to free you from enemy custody and take you home to ch'Rihan." She pulled the phaser pistol from her belt and handed it to him as he stepped out of his cell, then started walking back toward the threshold dividing the corridor, relieved to see that the force-field was still down. "We need to make our way to a transporter room."

"I know these starships," the Terran pilot told her as he hurriedly moved passed her. "The transporter rooms are just a short ways ahead."

They crossed the threshold, and D'Vahn and her fellow agent covered the doors with their weapons as they passed by them. They turned right out of the brig area and then left in the corridor and approached the closed doors ahead.

Suddenly, from up the side corridor to their left, someone shouted, "Hey, you! Stop!" The pilot jumped, startled, a froze in place, but the spy quickly crouched against the corner of the wall to his left, and by the time D'Vahn had dropped to one knee and raised her rifle at who turned out to be a redshirted crewman pointing a phaser pistol at them, the spy had fired, dropping the target unconscious to the deck.

The doors ahead of them opened and they hurried forward. "How much farther to the transporter room?" D'Vahn asked the pilot as they made a quick right and then a left.

"Just ahead and to the left," he replied.

"If you are lying..."

"I'm not!" he assured her. "I swear!"

D'Vahn grabbed a handful of his shirt near his shoulder and pushed him forward, but right before he made that turn to the left into the corridor that ran between transporter rooms one and three, two armed security officers stepped out of the turbolift just ahead of them and reached for their phasers when they spotted them. "Stop right there!" one of them shouted as they both took aim. The pilot stopped as ordered, but D'Vahn and the spy raised their phasers and fired, striking both men in the dead center of their chests before they could fire back. The man the spy had shot dropped his phaser and collapsed to the deck—they knew that he was

unconscious—but the man D’Vahn had shot glowed for a moment and then disappeared, just like the others.

From the enemy’s perspective, I have assaulted several of their officers, she mused. I have even murdered some of them. I must escape, or else I will surely be executed.

She pushed the pilot ahead once more and he led them around the corner and into the narrower corridor. “Transporter room one or three?” he then asked.

“Choose!” D’Vahn replied impatiently as she fell back to cover their rear.

He chose number three, for no reason other than it happened to be the one at which he was looking when she told him to choose one. The door opened ahead of him, and as he walked inside, the man in the red jumpsuit who was standing behind the controls, presumably the transporter operator on duty, looked up at him from behind the console and asked him, “Who are you?”

“I’m an escaping prisoner,” the pilot replied.

The operator suddenly brandished a small phaser—a type-I. “Then you can stop right there, prisoner,” he warned as he slowly moved out from behind the console.

The pilot stopped, exactly as the operator ordered, and raised his hands in surrender. “Please, don’t shoot me,” he pleaded.

The spy appeared suddenly from around the corner of the doorway, in the corridor, and shot the operator before he could react. Then he rushed inside, D’Vahn right on his heels. He stepped around behind the console and looked over the controls. They were dark. He tested a few of them, but there was no power. “The system is offline,” he told the others.

“That’s easily remedied,” the pilot told him. He knelt down in front of the console and opened an access panel up under its bottom. “This won’t take but a moment, he said as he started altering some of the circuitry components inside.”

“What are you doing?” the spy asked him, bending down to take a closer look at what he was doing.

“I’m going to bypass the security lockout,” the pilot replied as he worked.

The spy straightened and watched the controls...and pointed his phaser at the pilot, which did not go unnoticed. A few seconds later the system powered up and the transporter controls came online. “You have done it,” the spy told him. “We have power and the system appears to be operational.”

“You two get to the platform,” the pilot said. “I’ll set the system.”

D’Vahn and her fellow agent glanced at one another briefly—they were obviously both wondering whether or not they could truly trust their conscripted comrade—and then hurried up onto the platform as the pilot entered the coordinates for their destination, pushed the three slides down and then forward to begin transport, and then quickly joined his fellow escapees up on the platform. Seconds later, the three of them began to beam away.

An indicator on the Defense Subsystems Monitor station’s board started flashing red, catching the attention of the security lieutenant who was sitting there. “Commander Spock,” she called out as she reacted, trying to shut down the transporter systems in transporter room-three, “someone has bypassed security lockout in transporter room-three and is beaming out.”

“Cut power to all transporter systems, Lieutenant,” Kirk ordered, having heard her

report as he stepped out of the turbolift and onto the bridge.

"I'm trying, sir," the lieutenant told him, redirecting her attention to the captain, "but it's not working. They've locked out my override as well."

"They appear to be beaming over to the stealth ship," Spock reported, peering into his scope. "Or, Captain, they might have beamed to another location within the *Enterprise*. I am reading conflicting energy signals."

"*Security to Captain,*" the intercom called.

Kirk punched the comm. button on his chair as he sat down. "Kirk here."

"*I just found the transporter chief in transporter room-three unconscious, sir. Looks like he's been stunned by a phaser.*"

"*Lieutenant Garrovick breaking in, sir. The two pilots and the Romulan spy have escaped from the brig. We've got men down in the corridors.*"

"*Ensign Wilson here, sir. We have a man down in the armory as well.*"

Kirk looked over at Spock and said, "My guess is they're on that stealth ship, Spock." Then he turned his eyes to the security lieutenant at the DSM station and told him, "Ensure we have primary power restored to all transporter systems, Lieutenant." Finally, he hit his intercom button and ordered, "All transporter rooms, lock onto everyone aboard that vessel in our tractor beam and beam them back to this ship."

"It's too late, Captain," Spock reported. "They have raised their shields. They are also charging weapons."

"Ensign Isel..." Kirk said, turning his attention to the navigator.

"Bringing phasers online, sir," the Deltan advised him, "but their vessel is too close to us. I can't get a clean shot without risk to our own ship."

"Transfer weapons control to the helm," Kirk ordered. "Mister Kyle, set aft ventral phasers to one-quarter power. I want just enough punch to get their attention."

"Aft ventral phasers to one-quarter power, sir," Kyle acknowledged.

"Fire when ready."

Isel brought the aft image up on the screen just as the single blue phaser beam lashed out from beneath the *Enterprise's* hangar deck and struck the stealth vessel's forward shields. The target returned fire with its dorsal bank and scored a direct hit on the *Enterprise's* aft ventral bank, knocking it out of commission, and then swept forward to the tractor beam emitter and destroyed it.

"Damage report on both vessels, Spock?" Kirk inquired.

"Aft ventral phaser offline," the first officer replied. "Tractor beam emitter destroyed. Opponent vessel's forward shield down eighteen percent. Vessel is now free and adjusting its heading to withdraw."

"How is that ship's propulsion even operational, Spock? Our phasers..."

"Unknown, Captain," Spock answered. "They have certainly not had sufficient time to... Captain..." He looked over at Kirk. "...they are now deploying a secondary pair of warp nacelles that my readings indicate are online and fully operational."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "A secondary pair of... Mister Kyle, phasers to full power. Fire to disable the second you have a solution."

"Aye, sir."

On the screen, the stealth vessel had rotated to face aft and was pitching forward to

face “down” while its previously hidden nacelles continued to deploy straight out to port and starboard. Then, when it reached a pitch angle of roughly forty-five degrees positive, it began to pull away. Then it fired both phaser banks, striking the *Enterprise*’s port warp nacelle and damaging it moderately. Kyle returned fire, but the target vessel broke to port and he missed. It fired once more, striking and damaging the starboard nacelle before Kyle had raised the shields. Kyle fired back again and missed again as the vessel resumed its evasive maneuvers and broke free of the *Enterprise*’s warp field.

The engineering station started sparking and crackling suddenly and the engineer on duty stood up and backed safely away as a thin layer of blue-gray smoke drifted up into the air to be drawn away by the bridge’s ventilation system.

“Sorry, Captain, I missed them,” Kyle reported regretfully. “They’re just too quick—too maneuverable.”

“Damage report, Engineer!” Kirk demanded, finding no fault in Kyle’s efforts.

“Warp systems offline, Captain,” the engineer replied from the next station over as he reconfigured it for his purposes. Then he looked over his shoulder at the captain and added, “Minor damage to the starboard nacelle. Moderate damage to the port.”

“How long for repairs?” Kirk asked Scotty as the chief engineer rushed out of the turbolift onto the bridge.

“Out here, sir?” Scotty exclaimed. Then he joined his man at the ad hoc engineering station, checked a few readouts, and finally replied, “A few minutes for the starboard nacelle if we’re lucky, sir, but the port nacelle might take days!”

Kirk practically jumped to his feet and marched over to the railing. “We don’t *have* days, Mister Scott!” he sternly pointed out. “Can we fly her on one nacelle like a destroyer any sooner than that?”

“Aye, sir, but not easily,” Scotty replied with a sigh—he clearly didn’t like the idea at all, “and certainly no’ at anything close to full velocity! I can rig it, but it’ll be no simple task. Yeh have to understand, sir, those dual-drive nacelles are no’ designed the same as ours. It’ll take several hours!”

“What can you give me when you’re finished?”

“*Maybe* warp five if we’re lucky, sir, but that’s the best case. More likely no’ more than four-point-five or six.”

“I’ll take it, Mister Scott,” Kirk told him. “Get on it.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Mister Kyle,” Kirk called as he returned to his chair, “come about and follow that ship. Give me whatever speed you can squeeze out of her under impulse for now.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Stealth vessel has gone to warp,” Spock reported.

Kirk looked over at his first officer. “Mister Spock, do everything you can to...”

“Sir.” Spock interrupted as he straightened from his scope and faced the captain. “I have already lost them.”

CHAPTER 10

U.S.S. Enterprise log, stardate 2754.3. Commander Spock recording. Four hours forty-seven minutes have now passed since both of Enterprise's warp nacelles were damaged by phaser fire during the Section Thirty-One agents' escape with the Romulan spies. Chief Engineer Scott and his team are completing adjustments to the starboard nacelle, the lesser damaged of the two, that will enable it to function, at least temporarily, as a single unit, similar to those utilized by Starfleet's scouts and destroyers. If all goes as planned, Commander Scott expects the Enterprise to be able to achieve a maximum velocity of warp five. How long we might be able to maintain that velocity, however, remains to be seen.

"All right, sir," the young engineering ensign standing beside Commander Scott at the main board said while a dozen of her superiors, most of them wearing the new protective heavy-duty protective suits, carried out their own individual tasks all around them, "she's online and all readings are nominal, but we're taking an awfully big risk. She's simply not designed to carry the whole load like this."

"Aye, lassie, I know," Scotty replied.

"I'm serious, sir," the young woman emphasized, turning to him. "Those single-drive nacelles are different in several ways and are always centrally mounted above or below their ships' hulls for very good reason. An unbalanced warp field..."

"Lassie..." Scotty repeated, meeting her concerned gaze, "I know. Remember who yer talkin' to. I've been the chief engineer aboard this ship for years and was the assistant chief for years before that. I was babyin' these bairns when you were still chasin' little boys across the elementary school playground."

"Girls, sir," she commented after a moment. "I chased girls."

"Whatever," Scotty said, brushing that unimportant detail aside. "The point is... Ach, never mind." He turned back to his work and told her, "I'll let the captain know we're ready."

"Warp five-point-five is the best she'll do, sir," she informed him, dropping the other subject—*both* other subjects. "Anything more will blow the system for sure."

"Scott to bridge."

Commander Spock, who was currently sitting in command, pressed the comm. button on the arm of the chair. "Spock here. Go ahead, Mister Scott."

"The nacelle is online and we're ready to give it a go, Mister Spock, but she's gonna be a bit touchy. I recommend no more than warp five-point-two at the absolute maximum, and only if absolutely necessary. She'll likely fail if yeh push her that hard for more than a few minutes."

"Understood, Mister Scott. We shall endeavor not to 'push her that hard.' Bridge out." Spock closed the channel and then issued the orders that he knew the captain would have issued had he been on the bridge at that moment, beginning with Lieutenant Xon, who had been filling in for him at the science station since Kirk left. "Mister Xon, continue long-range scans for the stealth vessel's warp signature. Mister Kyle, engage warp power and increase

velocity to warp factor five slowly. If all systems remain steady at that velocity for one full minute, then increase in factor point-zero-one increments to warp five-point-two.”

“Aye, sir,” Kyle acknowledged.

“Lieutenant Palmer,” he called out to the blond-haired woman who was once again manning the communications station, “please advise the captain that warp drive is online and that we are underway.”

“Aye, sir.” She opened a channel. “Bridge to Captain Kirk.”

Captain Kirk lay on his bed, on top of the blankets in his trousers and socks, his shirt and tee shirt both draped over the foot of the bed. He’d hoped he might grab a few hours’ much needed sleep, but all he’d managed to do over those past few hours was drift in and out, catching a half-dozen or so catnaps. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that he hadn’t fully undressed or climbed in under the blankets, but those were steps he rarely took in the middle of a mission anyway. As captain, he needed to be able to respond as quickly as possible to potential emergencies, and that was always easier to do when he was already half-dressed.

“*Bridge to Captain Kirk,*” Lieutenant Palmer’s voice called over the intercom.

Speaking of which... Kirk sat up, turned, and dropped his feet to the deck, grabbed his tee shirt, and then started pulling it on as he answered, “Kirk here.”

“*The warp drive is online and we’re underway, sir,*” she reported.

“What’s our velocity, Lieutenant?”

“*Spock here, Captain,*” the first officer broke in. “*We are currently traveling at warp five, increasing to five-point-two in small increments. Commander Scott recommends that we not exceed that velocity.*”

“Traveling in what direction?” Kirk asked he stood up and continued getting dressed.

“*The stealth ship’s last known course, sir, toward Romulan space.*”

“Doesn’t that course seem a little too obvious to you, Spock?”

“*Perhaps, Captain,*” Spock admitted. But then he countered, “*However, we know that Lieutenant T’Lon, whoever she really is, is a Romulan agent. We are reasonably certain that she broke the other Romulan agent out of the brig and took him and the stealth vessel’s pilots with her, and we are reasonably certain that they are the ones who transported to the stealth vessel and escaped aboard it. Therefore, as obvious as that course might seem, it is logical to assume that they would make a direct run for Romulan space and are therefore maintaining that course. As you know, Captain, the shortest distance between two points...*”

“All right, Spock,” Kirk interrupted, “you made your point, logical as always. They’re heading for Romulan space, presumably along that course. Continue along that heading and update me as warranted. I’m on my way to the brig to find out what our other guests might be able to tell us. Kirk out.” He closed the channel and then left his quarters.

“Lieutenant Chekov,” Kirk said as he walked into the young security chief’s office to find him working hard at his desk.

“Keptin,” Chekov returned, looking up at him and then starting to stand.

“As you were,” Kirk said, briefly raising a hand, gesturing for him to keep his seat.

Then, as Chekov sat back down, he took a seat as well in the visitor's chair beside the desk and asked him, "Have you checked in on your men in sickbay?"

"Yes, sir," Chekov answered, clearly proud to have already met one of his captain's expectations before being asked. "Doctor McCoy already released them to their quarters. He tells me they will be ready to return to duty after twenty-four hours of strict bed rest, barring any unforeseen complications, of course."

"Of course," Kirk echoed, satisfied with that answer. Then he asked, "What are you working on right now?"

Chekov turned his gaze back to his monitor with a sigh and answered in a much more somber tone of voice. "I'm writing the official letters of condolences to Ensigns Rodriguez' and Vedeneyev's families." He sighed again, and then added, "I never imagined that it would be this difficult."

"I'm afraid they never get any easier, either," Kirk told him straight out. "If anything, they get harder. You feel the numbers growing with each and every one of them."

Chekov seemed to ponder that unpleasant fact for a moment, then looked back at the captain and asked, "Will you want to add anything when I am finished, Keptin?"

"Yes, I will," Kirk replied as though there should have been no question about that. "As captain of the *Enterprise*, it's my duty, Lieutenant."

"Then I will forward them to you when I am finished, sir."

"Thank you." Kirk let a few moments pass in silence—watched closely while Chekov stared blankly at his screen. The younger man looked lost, out of his depth, and Kirk knew from his own past experiences exactly how that felt. He was young and had, at times, found his recent appointment as security chief to be a little overwhelming, but he'd also risen to meet every challenge that billet had laid at his feet, and Kirk felt confident that he could and would continue to do so. "Mister Chekov," he finally said. The lieutenant looked over at him once more. "Just be honest. Your men sacrificed their lives in the performance of their duties, in defense of their ship and her crew. Nothing can bring them back, but it usually helps the families to know that their loved ones died honorably."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Now about our remaining guests?" Kirk asked, moving on. "Have any of them begun talking yet?"

"No, sir," Chekov replied as though he couldn't believe it himself. "Not a peep. I'm beginning to think they might all be mute."

Kirk stood up. "Come with me, Lieutenant. Let's go see if we can convince one of them to change their mind."

They left the office and turned up the corridor toward the security force-field. "What if they just continue to refuse to talk, Keptin?" Chekov asked as Kirk reached up to the panel to deactivate field.

Seeing that at least a few of the prisoners were on their feet and looking their way, Kirk answered the question for them as much as for Chekov. "Then they'll continue to cool their heels in our brig until we can turn them over to the proper authorities, Lieutenant."

They walked in among the cells and drew the attention of the rest of the prisoners as well as they glanced around. *Time for a hand or two of Poker*, Kirk decided.

"I'm Captain James T. Kirk, commanding officer of this vessel, and I know more than

you might think I do,” he began. “For example, I know that all of you are MACOs. You wear no insignia on your uniforms and your uniforms are not the standard issue, but I recognize the look in your eyes. I see how each of you carry yourselves. I also know that some MACOs are assigned to Section Thirty-One. Your non-standard uniforms and lack of insignia tell me that you all fall into that category. That makes those two who were piloting your vessel agents of Section Thirty-One, as the section would not hire pilots without fully vetting them, and since you broke a known Romulan agent out of custody for them and were caught trying to deliver that agent to Earth, I’m forced to conclude that Section Thirty-One wants that agent in *their* sole custody, probably to keep him from talking too much—to prevent him from disclosing their connection to the Romulan Tal-Shiar.” He paused for a moment and looked over their attentive but expressionless faces, then concluded with a question. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yes, Captain, you are,” one of the alleged MACOs behind Kirk—a woman—replied almost immediately, surprising him. Correction—*formerly* alleged. She had just admitted that he was right.

Kirk turned around to see from whom exactly the response had so freely come, then stepped up to the front of that cell, from inside of which a blond-haired woman who stood nearly six feet tall was gazing down at him through sky-blue eyes. “You’re their commanding officer, I assume?” he asked the woman.

She nodded, then replied, “Major Sam Norendal. Samantha. As old and cliché as this might sound, Captain, we were just following orders.”

“You’re right, Major,” he told her. “That is an old and cliché excuse, and it’s never held water when it counted.”

“I agree, sir,” she replied. “But orders aren’t always so easy to ignore, and violating them can bring about severe consequences unless one does so very carefully.”

“I wouldn’t know about that.”

“Oh really?” Norendal asked him, actually laughing. “I’ve heard otherwise from quite a few commodores and even a few admirals back home. Oh, wait,” she quickly added when she saw that Kirk was about to respond. “I forgot. You’re *never* wrong, are you, Captain?”

“Why are you willing to talk all of the sudden?” Kirk asked her, ignoring the jab.

“Because our assignment was an illegal one,” she answered matter-of-factly. “What Section Thirty-One did...the whole *Copernicus* thing...was wrong, and what they allowed the Romulans to do, whether a small part of it resulted of a double-crossed or not, was beyond criminal. It was immoral.”

“So why haven’t you spoken up before now?”

“Because *you* haven’t come to see me before now, Captain,” she answered matter-of-factly. “Because I needed to bring my case to someone like you—someone of command rank who’s not afraid to challenge the brass upstairs. And because Section Thirty-One has a very nasty habit of coming out on top nice and squeaky clean whenever someone challenges them or accuses them of any wrongdoing...including those of us who work for them. I can’t very well try to make things right if I suddenly disappear, never to be heard from again, can I?”

“Certainly not, Major,” Kirk affirmed. “Tell me everything.”

“I don’t know *everything*, Captain,” she told him, “but I’ll tell you what I *do* know.”

“That’s all I can ask.”

The major held Kirk’s gaze while she hesitated for a moment, then said, “I suggest we

put it on the record, sir—make it legal and binding...just in case.”

Just in case what? Kirk wondered. *In case someone disappears you? Someone aboard the Enterprise?* Ever since the *Saladin* and the two dreadnoughts had shown up to help chase the Klingons back across the neutral zone back when Finnegan’s unit was still aboard, he and Spock had suspected that one of the crew might secretly be working for Admiral Nogura. If that was a real possibility, then why not the possibility that there might be a Section Thirty-One spy aboard as well?

“Very well.” Kirk finally replied. Then he turned to Chekov. “Mister Chekov...”

“One more thing, Captain,” Norendal told him, drawing his attention back to her. “A request, if you would be so kind. Release my people from your brig? Put them in some decent quarters? Guard them if you must. I’ll accept full responsibility for their actions.”

Kirk thought about it for a moment, then turned back to Chekov once more. “Mister Chekov, contact the bridge and have Spock and Ensign Kirk meet the major and me in the briefing room. Then have the major’s people assigned to guest quarters and post a couple of guards in the corridor. They’re to *stay* in those quarters until further notice.”

“Aye, Keptin.”

As Chekov walked off, Kirk deactivated the force-field and waved Norendal out of her cell. “Come with me, Major.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Norendal said as she stepped out.

A few minutes later, Kirk was sitting across the wider end of the briefing room table from Major Norendal, waiting for his nephew and Mister Spock to arrive, when he began to wonder if she truly intended to tell him everything. MACOs were well-trained—some might even say ‘indoctrinated’—and never folded easily under pressure. Despite what she had said back in the brig, if she didn’t really intend to tell him everything she knew, he was going to have to apply a lot more pressure to drag whatever she might hold back out of her. “Once you start, don’t leave anything out, Major,” he reminded her, hoping that that would be enough. “I can’t stand up for you later if you hold anything back from me now.”

“I understand, Captain,” she replied. “Like I said, I’ll tell you what I know.”

As if on cue, the doors opened and his nephew and Mister Spock walked in. “Captain, Mister Chekov stated that you require our assistance,” Spock said.

“Please man the computer, Mister Spock. Ensign Kirk, take the seat beside me.” He gestured toward the major as both officers moved to their seats, Peter obediently taking the seat to his uncle’s immediate left. “This is Major Samantha Norendal, commanding officer of the MACO squad that’s been occupying our brig.”

“Major,” Spock greeted her as he sat down.

“Commander,” she replied in kind. “I’ve never seen a Vulcan up close before, except in pictures. Forgive me for saying so, but you really *do* look exactly like a Romulan.”

“Fortunately, Major, physical appearance and biological characteristics are where the similarities between the Vulcan and Romulan peoples begin and end,” Spock pointed out.

“That’s enough, Major,” Kirk told her sternly. “I don’t know what history you might have with the Romulans, but I strongly suggest that you repress any feelings of bigotry that Commander Spock’s appearance might cause you to experience. I don’t tolerate that aboard

my ship. Is that understood?" When the major only pursed her lips and dropped her gaze to the tabletop with a slight nod without saying anything, Kirk glared at her for a moment and then turned his eyes to his first officer. "We're going to take the major's sworn deposition regarding everything she knows about some of Section Thirty-One's illegal activities," Kirk informed him.

"Very well," Spock replied. Then he activated the computer and loaded a cartridge as Kirk turned his attention back to the major.

"You'll identify yourself fully and then make your statement, in which you are to relate all relevant information of which you are aware," the captain told her. "Afterwards, any questions I might ask you and your answers to those questions will also go on the record."

"I understand," Norendal told him.

"Ready, Captain," Spock then informed him.

"Proceed," Kirk replied.

Spock looked at the major. "Please state for the record your full name, serial number, and current assignment."

"Norendal, Samantha Lynn, Major, serial number F-O six-two-seven dash one-one-four-six M-A-C, current assignment, commanding officer, MACO Ghost-three."

"What follows is Major Norendal's sworn deposition, recorded stardate twenty-seven fifty-four point four, fifteen forty-five hours, ship's time," Spock stated for the record. Then, also for the record, he asked the major, "Major Samantha Lynn Norendal, do you make the following statement of your own volition, in the total absence of any form of coercion, and with full knowledge and understanding of your legal rights?"

"I do," she firmly replied.

"Very well. Please proceed."

Norendal cleared her throat, swallowed, and then proceeded as requested. "My team, MACO Ghost-three, is a combat assault squad lawfully and permanently assigned to Starfleet Section Thirty-One," she began. "Our orders, in this particular instance, were to accompany two of Section Thirty-One's agents to the Tantalus-Five Penal Colony, to take custody of the Romulan agent who had been apprehended on Parliament while posing as Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan and then confined there...by any means necessary...and then to return him to Earth and turn him over to Section Thirty-One. In this case, 'by any means necessary' included the use of force up to and including deadly force...if it came to that. Fortunately, it did not.

"I knew all along those orders were...questionable at best, if not entirely unlawful, but as I explained earlier, Section Thirty-One is...different. I chose to accept and carry out those orders, as was my duty as I saw it at the time. I accept full responsibility for my actions and will accept whatever consequences may result. The troops under my command in turn obeyed *my* orders, as required, and should not be held responsible.

"As for why Thirty-One wants custody of the Romulan agent so badly, I'm afraid my suspicions amount to little more than speculation. I *believe* that Section Thirty-One...*part* of it at least...has ties to the Romulan agency known as the Tal-Shiar. I *believe* that at least some of Section Thirty-One's agents, if not all of them, were complicit in the attacks on Vulcan, Andoria, Tellar Prime, and Babel. And I *believe* that they intended to disappear the enemy agent because he knows too much. Unfortunately, I have no *proof* of any of this."

"Who did you receive your orders from, Major?" Kirk asked her.

"I don't know, sir," she replied...honestly, as best he could tell. "My contact in Thirty-One never meets with me or even talks to me personally. I don't even know if it's a man or a woman. I receive my orders via text over random communications channels that I'm required to monitor at all times and have never been able to trace back to a point of origin."

"If, as you say, you have no proof of what you suspect, then on what do you base your suspicions?"

"Deduction mostly. Comments people have made, conversations I've overheard..."

"Such as?"

She drew a deep breath and let it go slowly and noisily, then advised him, "This might take a while, Captain."

"We have the time, Major," he pointed out.

"All right then, Captain. Here's the whole story."

Later, when Major Norendal had finished making her statement and had answered all of Kirk's questions to the best of her ability—at least Kirk and Spock both assumed that she had—the captain thanked his first officer and his nephew for their assistance and dismissed them, telling Spock as he and Peter exited together, "I'll escort the major to her quarters and then see you on the bridge in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir," Spock replied.

Then, once Spock and Ensign Kirk had turned the corner to their right and walked out of earshot, the ensign said, "Unless I'm missing something, sir, Major Norendal only shares our suspicions and doesn't really *know* anything more than we know." Then he asked, "How does that help us?"

"For one thing, Ensign, we now know *for sure* that Section Thirty-One is, in fact, responsible for breaking the Romulan spy out of the Tantalus Colony," Spock answered as they approached and then walked onto the turbolift. "By taking that action, Section Thirty-One has incriminated itself regarding the question of its involvement in the previous attacks." The doors closed as both men turned to face them. "Bridge."

"I see how that makes them *look* guilty, sir," Peter admitted as the lift began to move, starting laterally, "but it still doesn't *prove* anything."

"No it does not," Spock initially agreed, "but examine all of the relative facts of the situation logically, Ensign."

"Sir?"

"We now know beyond a reasonable doubt that Section Thirty-One is responsible for breaking the spy out of the Tantalus Colony. Why would they want to do that?"

"Because they have something to hide, sir" Peter guessed. "The spy knows something they want to keep secret."

"And what might that something be?" Spock then asked him, following up.

"He's a Romulan agent, so it would obviously have something to do with them."

"Such as?" Spock prompted him.

"Such as...whether or not there actually *is* any connection between the Romulans and Section Thirty-One."

"A connection that we already suspect does exist," Spock reminded him. "Assuming

for the moment that it does, what does that infer?”

“Well...the Romulans recently attacked us, but that doesn’t necessarily mean...”

“And where was Starfleet at that time?” Spock inquired.

“Sir?” Peter asked him. There was no way he could know the answer to that question, and it wasn’t like Spock to ask for conjecture.

The lift slowed to a near stop and then started to rise. “Ensign Kirk, three squadrons, each consisting of three Romulan warbirds, simultaneously attacked three of the Federation’s four founding worlds,” he reminded him, “and three stolen *Columbia*-class starships attacked Babel only minutes later. Where were the Starfleet vessels assigned to those areas when those attacks occurred? Are we to believe that the Starfleet contingents of all three worlds’ defense forces just happened to be off-station at the same time? Are we to believe that any world as important to Federation politics as Babel was would *ever* be left undefended, let alone while high-level negotiations were underway there? Such a set of circumstances would be highly coincidental to say the least, wouldn’t you agree, Ensign?”

“Yes, sir,” Peter replied. “*Too* highly coincidental to be believable.”

“Indeed,” Spock responded, pleased with the ensign’s answer. “And the most logical alternative theory would be?”

Peter thought about it for a few moments. The commander was obviously testing him. This Vulcan, his uncle’s first officer, had chosen this moment to give him a crash-course on thinking logically—another step in his post-academy training—and he most likely intended to discuss the results of the impromptu session with his uncle at the earliest opportunity. He had to stay sharp. He had to answer correctly. “They were drawn off...or ordered off station.”

“Precisely,” Spock said, the word filling Peter with a sense of relief. He was on the right track. Then Spock asked him, “By whom?”

“It would have to have been an admiral...or admirals, plural,” he answered, feeling pretty confident. “No one else would have the authority.”

“And who in Starfleet Command’s hierarchy would you theorize possesses the *power* to both issue such orders *and* see that they are carried out, even without possessing the legal *authority* to do so?”

“Probably Section Thirty-One, sir,” Peter answered. “At least, I can’t think of anyone else who might.”

The lift slowed to a stop and the doors opened onto the bridge. “Are you beginning to see where the captain’s thoughts are leading him, Ensign?” Spock asked as they stepped out.

“Yes, sir, I think I am.”

“Mister Spock?” Scotty called as he stood up from the engineering station, drawing Spock over while Peter went the other way, no doubt feeling pretty good about himself.

“Mister Scott?” Spock replied.

“Can yeh spare me a moment, sir? I’m growin’ real concerned about the engines.”

“More concerned than usual, Mister Scott?” Spock asked him.

“Aye, *much* more. The *Enterprise* is no’ a scout or a destroyer. Our nacelles were no’ designed to work as single units.”

“Then we are indeed quite fortunate that your legendary engineering expertise has once more proven sufficient to the task and allowed you to successfully adapt them.”

“We only adapted *one* o’ them, Mister Spock,” Scotty clarified, “and sooner or later

the strain is gonna prove to be too much for it. If it weren't brand new it would likely o' given out already. How much longer are we gonna have to push it?"

"How much longer are we going to have to push what, Mister Scott?" Kirk asked as he appeared behind his first officer, having just stepped off of the lift.

"The starboard nacelle, sir," Scotty answered, turning his attention to the captain as Spock bowed out and stepped away toward his station. "As I was just tellin' Mister Spock, if it weren't practically brand new it would o' failed already."

"We're pursuing two escaped enemy agents and a pair of Federations citizens likely complicit in capital crimes, Mister Scott," Kirk reminded him. "If we're going to have any chance of catching them, we need to maintain our warp drive capability."

"If that nacelle fails, Captain, you'll have none!" Scotty countered desperately.

"In that case, Scotty, I trust you won't let it fail."

"Captain?" Spock called, drawing Kirk's attention to the other side of the bridge as Scotty sighed and shook his head in response.

"Aye, Captain," Kirk heard the chief engineer acquiesce behind him when he started walking toward the science station, where Spock was standing and peering into his scope, just as Lieutenant Xon, who had been manning the station, stepped into the turbolift.

"What is it, Spock?"

"I'm picking up the stealth vessel's warp signature, sir," Spock reported. "It is barely registering on my instruments, but it is *definitely* that vessel's signature."

Kirk looked forward to the main viewscreen and asked, "Can you determine how long ago they came this way?"

"Not precisely, but I would estimate approximately two and a half hours ago."

"Two and a half hours," Kirk repeated as he looked back at Spock again. "So we *are* closing on them, albeit slowly."

"Yes, sir. However..."

"However?" Kirk asked when Spock paused. "Spock?"

"They altered course very suddenly, sir. New course..." Spock looked partially toward him. "...one-eleven mark fourteen, sir." He stood up and faced the captain. "As you might recall, that course takes them directly toward the..."

"Yes, Mister Spock," Kirk interrupted, recalling all too well. "Directly toward the neutral zone and home. One-eleven mark fourteen remains forever etched in my memory."

"Indeed. And, Captain, assuming that both of our vessels' velocities remain constant, they will cross into the neutral zone nearly twenty-two minutes before we catch up to them."

"At which time we'll be forced to break off our pursuit or risk renewing hostilities between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire."

"Precisely."

Kirk turned and stepped down to the center seat. "Mister Scott..."

"I canno' give yeh but a wee bit more power, sir," Scotty told him, obviously having anticipated what the captain was going to ask of him. "A tenth of a factor at best, and even that much more might blow the whole riggin'!"

"Give me whatever you can, Mister Scott. We have to catch that ship."

CHAPTER 11

"Fifteen minutes to neutral zone border, Captain," Kyle reported.

"Captain, I have lost their warp signature trail," Spock then interjected, before Kirk could even acknowledge Kyle's report.

"What?" Kirk asked, looking over at his first officer. He'd heard what Spock had said, of course, but he didn't want to believe it. If that ship made it back across the neutral zone border, then their mission was over and they had failed.

Spock set his sensor scope to standby and then stood straight and faced the captain. "The stealth vessel's warp signature no longer registers on my instruments, sir."

"All stop, Mister Kyle," Kirk ordered immediately, glancing forward at the helmsman only briefly before he looked back at Spock.

"Answering all stop, sir," Kyle acknowledged.

"Any indication they might have changed course suddenly?" Kirk then asked.

"No, sir," the first officer replied, "and I don't believe they would have done so."

"Why not?"

Spock straightened a little more and folded his hands behind his back, then patiently explained, "While the course their warp trail indicated they were on was not the most direct course to the neutral zone, it was the course that would have gotten them there with the least chance of detection by an Earth outpost or any of our remote monitoring equipment. I believe it more likely they simply chose to cut power and proceeded to coast across the border at sub-light velocity on momentum alone, thus increasing their chances of not being detected."

"But why here," Kirk inquired, "just minutes from the border? Even if they *had* been detected, they would have made it across before anyone could intercept them."

"Captain Kirk," Uhura called from communications, "I might have the answer to that question right here. Captain Montoya of the *Alliance* is hailing us."

"I believe the lieutenant may be right, Captain," Spock opined.

"On screen, Lieutenant," Kirk ordered, facing forward and sitting up in his chair just a little straighter.

A couple of seconds later, Captain Montoya's image replaced that of deep space on the screen. She looked more tired than she had the last time they'd seen one another, Kirk noted. More stressed. "Captain Montoya," he greeted her. Then, before she could even return his greeting, he asked her, "Where are you? Our scanners haven't picked up your ship."

"*Hello again, Captain Kirk,*" she finally replied. "*We're orbiting the planet ahead of you. Just came around from what from your point of view is its far side.*"

"Lay in a course for the planet, Mister Chekov," Kirk ordered.

"Aye, Keptin," the navigator acknowledged.

"Mister Kyle, three-quarters impulse."

"Aye aye, sir."

"*So...what brings you out here, Captain?*" Montoya inquired.

"Fugitive Pursuit," he replied. "A pair of Section Thirty-One agents and some of their MACOs broke the Romulan spy out of confinement and escaped with a second Romulan agent who infiltrated my ship posing as a Vulcan. Their vessel's warp trail led us this far, but

we just lost it. I don't suppose you've seen a fifty-foot troop shuttle in the last little while?"

"*Hm. So that's who they were.*"

"Then you *have* seen them," Kirk remarked, feeling a surge of hope.

Montoya looked slightly to one side, off camera, giving Kirk the impression that she was looking *at* someone. "*Yes, Captain Kirk,*" she confirmed, "*I believe we have. We uh...we detected a vessel about that size sailing by our location on inertia only a little while ago, heading straight for the neutral zone.*"

"And?" Kirk prompted. "Did they make it across the border or did you stop them?"

"*Oh, we stopped them,*" she replied firmly, looking back at him.

"Then you have them in custody?"

"*No, Captain, we don't. Not exactly.*"

"What do you mean, not exactly?" Kirk pushed as Spock stepped up beside him.

"*Captain...maybe you'd better beam over here so we can discuss this privately, face-to-face.*"

"All right, Captain, we'll be there in ten minutes," Kirk told her. "Kirk out."

"Something is bothering her, Jim," Doctor McCoy opined as soon as her image faded and the view of deep space directly ahead returned to the screen. "She looked overly stressed. Haggard even."

Kirk turned his gaze to his friend the old Georgian doctor standing to his left—he'd been spending even more time than usual there lately. Not that Kirk minded at all. In fact, he was glad for the extra company. It helped to pass the long hours of travel when nothing out of the ordinary routine was going on. "Colonel Finnegan's presence could account for that," he remarked, only half-kidding.

"I don't think so, Jim," McCoy disagreed, shaking his head. "She looked anxious, like something's really weighing heavily on her shoulders."

"Any idea what it might be?" Kirk asked him, growing completely serious again and realizing as soon as he'd asked that it was a stupid question. Too late.

McCoy's brow creased as his eyes narrowed. "Now how the hell would I know?" he asked impatiently. "I'm a doctor, not a psychic. Ask him," he added, pointing toward Spock with his chin. "He's the mind-reader around here."

Kirk turned to his first officer. "Spock?"

"I'm forced to agree with the doctor, Captain," he admitted. "Captain Montoya did indeed appear to be suffering from the effects of excessive stress and strain, and while I am *not* a mind-reader in the literal sense to which Doctor McCoy alluded, I do agree that Colonel Finnegan's presence aboard her vessel, while no doubt an annoyance, is likely not sufficient cause for her apparent state."

Kirk looked ahead at the viewscreen while he paused to consider his friends' input for a few moments, then decided, "I want you both to accompany Ensign Kirk and me aboard the *Alliance*. Bones, I want you to..."

"Jim," McCoy interrupted quietly. "About Peter."

Kirk met the doctor's gaze. "What about him, Bones?"

"You're putting way too much pressure on the boy."

"How so?"

"Think about it, Jim. Since he signed aboard this ship he's watched Lieutenant Hodel

get eaten by Regulan bloodworms, he's been forced to listen to the man he loved take his own life while he lay in sickbay helpless to do anything about it, he's seen Security Chief Dickerson shot dead, you've put him to work at navigation, engineering, *and* security, he's been wounded at least twice, and he hasn't even been here six months yet. Back on Starbase-Six you complained that he was working too much, but ever since we pulled out of there you have been perpetuating that very same problem."

McCoy was right, and Kirk knew it. He had been pushing Peter, thinking that keeping him busy would help. Had he been wrong? "Okay, Bones," he said. "What do you suggest?"

"Just give the boy a rest, Jim. Assign him to navigation, *or* engineering, *or* security. I know you require your officers to cross-train, but don't try to make him learn everything at the same time."

"He *wants* to learn," Kirk argued. McCoy might have been right about Peter's having been given too much to learn too quickly, but he apparently hadn't taken that little fact into consideration. "He'll let me know if I'm asking too much of him."

"Huh!" McCoy grunted, drawing a few quick glances from around the bridge. "He's a Kirk, *Captain*. He doesn't know what '*too much*' is."

"Bones..."

"The boy's exhausted, Jim," McCoy emphasized, interrupting, refusing to allow the captain to brush his medical opinion aside. "If he weren't so damned adamant about staying with this ship I'd order *at least* a month's medical rest leave. And if you don't stop pushing him, *Captain*, that's exactly what I'll do anyway. *Officially*."

"All right, Bones, I surrender," Kirk told him. "I'll let him sit this one out. He stood up. "You two, on the other hand... You're still going over there with me. Bones, I'll want the best assessment of Captain Montoya's fitness for duty that you can give me without actually performing a physical. Off the record, based on observation alone."

"Now you know I can't make a proper health and fitness assessment just by observing someone during a meeting," the doctor complained.

"I'm just be looking for your gut feeling," Kirk told him. Then he turned to Spock, making it quite clear to the doctor that his part of the conversation was over. "Mister Spock... Well, you know why you're going."

"Indeed," Spock responded, an eyebrow raised.

Then as Kirk led Spock and McCoy toward the turbolift, he glanced over at the chief engineer and said, "Mister Scott, you're in command."

"Aye, sir."

* * * * *

A pair of *Alliance* security officers—a tall, muscular, dark-skinned male lieutenant and a much shorter olive-skinned female ensign who appeared to be nearly as muscular as her partner—escorted the three *Enterprise* officers from the transporter room directly to the deck-8-aft briefing room. The lieutenant pointed to a door ahead and told Kirk, "Right in there, sir. Captain Montoya's waiting."

"Thank you," Kirk said to the man.

The man nodded. Then, as the security officers walked away, the briefing room door opened and Kirk led his officers inside. "Captain Montoya, it's good to see you again," he greeted her said when he found her, Colonel Finnegan, and Major Peterson sitting side-by-side-by-side at the far end of the table, facing the doors, Finnegan to Montoya's left and Peterson to his left. In addition, a redshirted lieutenant was manning the computer terminal at the other end of the table.

"Captain Kirk," she replied, without standing, Kirk noted. As he and his officers had come aboard *her* ship and she equaled him in rank, she wasn't required to stand up, though he would have stood up for her out of courtesy had she come aboard the *Enterprise*. Then again, she might simply have been too exhausted. She looked even more tired face-to-face than she had looked on the viewscreen.

Kirk let it go and shifted his gaze to his old nemesis to greet him as well. "Colonel Finnegan...you're still here."

"Aye, it's good to see yeh again, too, Jimmy boy," Finnegan replied sarcastically.

Major Peterson was gazing up at him, quiet as usual—at least, that was the impression she had given him when she and the rest of Finnegan's unit had been stationed aboard the *Enterprise*—and "Major Peterson, it's good to see you again as well," Kirk said, smiling slightly at her as he, Spock, and McCoy approached the chairs directly across the table from them and sat down.

"Captain Kirk," she returned neutrally.

"Nothing personal mind you, Doctor McCoy," Montoya said, looking him right in the eye, "but...what are you doing here?"

"I asked him to come along," Kirk told her, saving the doctor from having to answer. "Doctor McCoy isn't just my chief medical officer. He's more than that. Like Mister Spock, he's my friend and I depend on his council."

"Fair enough," Montoya responded, surrendering more easily than Kirk had expected her to. After all, dreadnought captains didn't rise to become dreadnought captains by being liberal with the dissemination of strategic or tactical information. "Let's get on with it then. I suppose I should start by filling you in on what happened here."

"I suppose you should," Kirk agreed.

"As you know, I recently received orders to take up a patrol route along the Romulan neutral zone. We were patrolling a little deeper in this particular sector when our long-range sensors picked up a small vessel approaching the neutral zone border at warp four. Seconds after we detected them, they dropped to sub-light and cut power to their drive systems. Keep in mind, my orders specifically stated that I am to prevent all traffic from crossing that border in either direction by any means necessary."

"Any means?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain, *any* means," she emphasized. "I ordered an intercept course and hailed them, and *kept on* hailing them as we approached on an intercept course. They either didn't hear us or they refused to answer. I ordered them to reverse engines and come to all stop, and again they failed to respond, *and* failed to comply. I even threatened to fire on them, but it didn't make any difference. They failed to answer and failed to comply multiple times, so I put our tractor beam on them and *forced* them to stop." She dropped her gaze to the tabletop. "They responded to that by firing on the beam emitter and destroying it, so...I made good on

my threat.” She raised her eyes to the others once more. “We returned fire. Full phasers.”

“Full phasers?” Kirk asked, a little surprised. “You destroyed them?”

“No, Jim, of course not!” she protested. “They’d raised their shields by then, so we just knocked them offline and then targeted their engines.”

“Captain Montoya,” Spock said, “firing on a Federation vessel with full phasers after they specifically targeted and fired only on your tractor beam emitter could be construed as a violation of...”

“By any means necessary, Commander Spock,” the *Alliance*’s captain reminded him, interrupting. “That includes lethal force, if warranted.”

“I do realize that, Captain,” Spock told her, “but I fail to understand why you thought lethal force was warranted at that time.”

“I *didn’t* think it was warranted, Commander,” she replied impatiently, raising her voice, “and I didn’t employ it. As I said, we did *not* destroy the vessel.” She paused for a moment, and then lowered her voice and clarified, “Well, not directly anyway. My intent was only to *stop* it—to keep it from making it across the border. Unfortunately, we hit them just as they were jumping to warp. Their port nacelle exploded and the force of the blast threw them into a flat spin into the planet’s gravity well. They couldn’t maneuver and our tractor emitter was down. They went down somewhere in the eastern third of the northern continent. We were trying to find them when we detected your approach.”

“*Trying* to find them?” Kirk asked. “So you haven’t yet?”

“No. The planet is class-M, but something in the atmosphere is interfering with our scanners—some kind of radioactive element that seems to be confined to the ionosphere. It’s also interfering with our transporter signal, so when we *do* finally find them we’re going to have to go down there in a shuttlecraft.”

“Specifically in one o’ me assault shuttles,” Finnegan interjected. Then he looked at Kirk directly and pointed out, “If these people are who yeh say they are, Jimmy boy, we’re dealin’ with enemy agents and traitors. Recapturin’ ‘em will be a MACO mission.”

“Have you determined with certainty that this radioactive element is, in fact, confined to the ionosphere, Captain?” Spock inquired. “The fact that it’s interfering with your scanners suggests a likelihood that it might also cause erroneous readings.”

“What are you suggesting, Spock?” Kirk asked him.

“If this element exists in the lower atmosphere as well, its presence there might prove harmful to life,” Spock answered matter-of-factly. “Perhaps even fatal.”

“Are you saying those people we’re after might just be dead already, Spock?” McCoy asked him.

“I am suggesting that that is one possibility only, Doctor,” Spock clarified. “We have insufficient data at this time on which to base *any* conclusion with certainty.”

“We can test the atmosphere from inside the shuttle after we land, before anyone goes outside,” Finnegan offered. “If we find it dangerous, we can take precautions.”

“And Doctor McCoy will be right there with us when we find the fugitives, in case they need medical attention,” Kirk added.

“With *us*, yeh say, Jimmy?” the colonel inquired. “When *we* find the fugitives?”

“We’re going down there with you, Colonel,” Kirk told him.

“The *hell* yeh say, boyo!”

“My mission, *boyo*, is to bring that Romulan agent back to Starfleet Command!” Kirk made clear, losing patience with the man. “Those Section Thirty-One agents and their MACO goons interfered with that mission and that *other* Romulan agent murdered members of my crew! You’re a combat officer, Finnegan, and we won’t interfere with your command over your troops if this turns into a combat situation, but we *are* going down there with you!”

“Well,” Montoya quickly spoke up when Finnegan didn’t reply right away, “now that that’s settled, I suppose our next step is to narrow down the search area as much as possible. We can’t very well search a third of the continent on foot.” She stood up, so the others did as well as she continued, “Captain Kirk, you and your officers are welcome to accompany me to the bridge while Colonel Finnegan returns to brief his troops and to stand by to prepare with them...somewhere else.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Kirk replied, trying his best not to crack a smile.

Peterson turned her eyes to Finnegan and, seeing that he wasn’t going to respond to that, told the others, “I guess we’ll go brief the troops and then stand by with them.” Then she flashed Kirk a quick smile as she headed for the door with the colonel on her heels.

“Wait by the door for a moment, will you, Colonel?” Montoya requested.

“Aye,” he replied.

“It was nice to see you again, Major,” Kirk told Peterson, returning her smile with one of his own and pretending not to notice when McCoy rolled his eyes at the whole exchange.

“Nice to see you again, too, Captain Kirk,” she replied, still gazing at him as she approached the door.

“Oh for the love of God,” McCoy muttered under his breath.

“Let’s go, Major,” Finnegan said to her as he stepped into her line of sight and coaxed her out the door a little faster, while at the same time flashing Kirk a dirty look.

As far as Kirk was concerned, that made the whole exchange worthwhile.

“May I have a word with you alone, Captain?” Montoya requested of him just as he turned to speak with Spock and McCoy.

“Certainly,” he replied. He told his officers, “One moment, gentlemen,” then followed Montoya over to the farthest corner of the room. “What is it, Rachel?” he asked her.

“I just wanted to let you know, Jim... The likelihood that I fired on and...and might even have killed a Federation citizen...disturbs me. Even if he was a Section Thirty-One thug working in league with enemy spies, he was still one of us.”

“It would disturb any starship commander,” Kirk pointed out, “as it should. And try not to think of him in the past-tense. We don’t know that he’s dead.”

“I know, but...I just can’t help but think there’s something else that I could have done instead. Something that I should have tried first.”

“You’ve been a starship commander a lot longer than I have, Rachel. *Years* longer. You know what you’re doing out here as well as any of us and better than most. You acted within the scope of your orders. I would have done the same.”

“Maybe, but I made a bad decision, Jim,” she argued.

“We all make bad decisions sometimes,” he pointed out. “That’s all part of being a commanding officer. You know that as well as I do. Just as you know that it’s how we handle our mistakes and what we learn from them that makes us the kinds of leaders we truly are.”

She drew a deep breath and sighed, appeared to think about his words for another few

moments, and then looked at him and grinned. "I guess you're right, Jim," she said. "Thank you for that."

"My pleasure, Rachel," he replied. "And now I need a few moments alone with my officers. We'll meet you on the bridge?"

"Sure...if you think you can find it," she quipped.

"Oh, I think we can manage."

They went their separate ways, Montoya heading for the exit and Kirk watching her leave as he walked over to his waiting officers.

"You did that just to get under his skin, didn't you," McCoy accused. "Flashed the lady major that Don Juan smile of yours."

"That might have had something to do with it, Bones," Kirk freely admitted, "but she *did* smile at me first."

"Gentlemen," Spock cut in, "perhaps now is not the time..."

"Spock's right," Kirk said. "Did you hear any of that, Bones?"

"All of it," McCoy confirmed.

"What's your assessment of her state of mind?"

"Well," McCoy began, thinking it over even as he spoke, "based on the far too little opportunity for observation that I've been afforded, I'd say she's perfectly fit."

"What about the doubt she expressed over the actions she took?" Kirk asked.

"Perfectly normal and healthy," the doctor replied. "Reassuring actually. And, if I may say so, something with which you should feel very familiar yourself."

"Fair enough," Kirk said, satisfied. "Gentlemen, let's go join her on the bridge."

Montoya walked onto her bridge through the starboard doors and paused beside the officer currently manning the science station, who was standing and peering into the sensor scope, her fair-skinned face awash in its blue glow. "Report," she said.

The science officer straightened and met her captain's gaze. "Still nothing, Captain," she reported. "The interference is simply too strong to allow us to receive clean telemetry." She paused and glanced behind her when the visitors from the *Enterprise* entered through the port doors, then turned back to her captain and continued, "We *could* try landing a few sensor relay satellites on the highest mountain peaks and try to upload telemetry from them."

"Those satellites aren't made to be landed, Lieutenant," Montoya reminded the young woman.

"But they're sturdy enough to withstand being landed," the lieutenant countered, "and they'd give us a significantly strong return signal to work with."

"If I may, Captain?" Spock inquired.

"Commander?" Montoya asked, inferring her permission for him to speak.

Spock turned his eyes to the young lieutenant. "May I use your scanners to familiarize myself with the planet below?"

"Be my guest, sir," the science officer replied, stepping aside, out of his way.

"Thank you." Spock stepped up to the station, leaned down and peered into the scope. "Class-M, as you already determined," he began. "Various unremarkable topographies. Some variety of plant and animal life, though the interference of which you spoke is preventing me

from obtaining detailed life sign readings.”

“We know all that, Mister Spock,” Montoya pointed out somewhat impatiently. “Will the lieutenant’s idea work or won’t it?”

Spock straightened, surrendered the station back to the lieutenant, and faced Montoya. “Possibly, Captain,” he replied, “if the satellites’ maneuvering thrusters can provide enough thrust against the planet’s gravity to prevent damage to their instrument upon landing, which I believe they can. I suggest that you begin with a single satellite to test the theory.”

Montoya nodded and then addressed her science officer. “Pick a mountain and send the coordinates to the weapons console.”

“Aye, sir,” the young woman replied.

Spock rejoined Kirk and McCoy near the port doors while Montoya continued issuing orders as she stepped forward to the center seat. “Tactical officer, prepare to launch a sensor relay satellite to the coordinates coming to you from Sciences.”

“Aye, sir.”

“Activate its emergency self-preservation systems and launch as soon as it and you are ready,” she concluded as she sat down.

Everyone watched the changing images on the main viewscreen as the relay satellite slowly emerged from its storage bay along the belly of the *Alliance*’s engineering hull and then began to descend toward the planet’s surface. Once it had safely cleared the starship, its own programming took over and fired the attitude thrusters to turn it ‘upright’ in relation to the ground far below. Then, when it began to enter the atmosphere, its onboard deflector shields kicked on to protect it from the increasing heat caused by the resulting friction—heat that was already causing those shields to glow as though they had burst into flames. Not long after that, while the satellite was still miles above the surface, its main thrusters activated and slowed its momentum. The glow faded as the shields cooled. The satellite descended through the sky toward the targeted mountaintop, making small adjustments with its attitude thrusters as needed. Then, finally, several minutes later, it landed safely, very near the peak.

“Satellite has touched down on target,” the science officer reported. “Strange that the element interfering with our scanners and transporters didn’t affect our visual at all.”

“And?” Montoya inquired of the lieutenant as Kirk approached her.

“Receiving telemetry,” she advised. “It’s working, Captain. I’m getting much stronger and clearer readings now. There’s still some interference, but the telemetry I’m receiving is a lot more reliable.”

“Very good,” Montoya said. “Well done, Lieutenant.”

“That was a good idea, Rachel,” Kirk quietly reassured her.

“She’s young, but she has her moments,” Montoya replied just as quietly. Then she raised her voice again and asked, “How long before you have a complete and accurate scan of the surrounding, Lieutenant?”

“Given the uneven terrain and the residual interference, I’d estimate about...twelve to fifteen minutes for a complete sweep, Captain, to be *sure* the area’s clear.”

“All right. Find us another mountain and prepare a second satellite. As little overlap on the scanning perimeter as possible.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Tactical Officer, stand by to deploy.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk folded his arms across his chest and looked toward the viewscreen. “This may take a while,” he quietly observed, speaking to no one in particular.

“But at least we’re finally making progress,” Montoya pointed out, obviously having heard his remark. “At the very least we’ll identify several wide areas where they *didn’t* crash, which will *still* help us to shrink our search grid.”

Kirk looked over at her. “Process of elimination, Captain?” he asked her with a half-grin on his face.

“I know,” she replied, looking back at him. “Time-consuming.”

“That’s putting it mildly. But you’re right. It is progress.”

“Yes it is. We’re going to find your fugitives for you, Captain Kirk, and we’re going to bring them to justice.” She turned her gaze forward to the screen once more. “Assuming, of course, that they’re still alive down there somewhere.”

CHAPTER 12

“Stop the launch, Captain,” the science officer shouted. “The first satellite is picking something up.”

“Abort launch,” Captain Montoya ordered immediately for confirmation as she stood up, speaking directly to the tactical officer, who nodded his acknowledgement as he complied with her order. Then, as soon as he nodded a second time to confirm that the launch had been aborted, Montoya stepped back to the science officer’s side. “What’ve you got, Lieutenant?” she asked the young woman, who was still hunched over her scope.

“I’ve located what appears to be a debris field,” she replied. “Looks like hundreds of structural fragments scattered around a damaged but largely intact fuselage, presumably the vessel’s cockpit and passenger cabin assembly. Its dimensions and the overall mass of the wreckage are consistent with the vessel we fired on earlier. I’m also reading trace levels of radiation consistent with Federation warp drive technology. Not enough to be harmful if any exposure is kept to a minimum, but it’s there.”

“Life signs?” Montoya inquired.

“Negative, Captain, but I’m not reading any biological matter in the vicinity, either, as best I can tell.” She straightened, turned and met her captain’s gaze. “In my opinion, Captain, we should consider that to be evidence they survived. Assuming they did, they might have found some caves or other natural shelter in which to hide from us.”

“A logical hypothesis, Lieutenant,” Spock offered.

“Indeed it is,” Kirk agreed. Then he looked to *Alliance*’s captain. “Captain Montoya,” he began. But then he decided to make his appeal on a more personal level and lowered his voice. “Rachel...as this situation is ultimately my responsibility...”

“What are you talking about, Jim?” she asked him, interrupting. “*Enterprise* didn’t shoot those people down, *Alliance* did. That’s on me.”

“They escaped from my ship—my custody,” Kirk argued. “That’s *my* responsibility, and so is getting them back.” He paused, realizing what he had just done—realizing that he’d just argued openly with a fellow starship captain on the bridge of her own ship, where some of her officers could observe it. He knew better than to do that, and he genuinely felt bad for having done it. He had to make it right immediately. “Captain Montoya, you’re in command here and I won’t question whatever decision you ultimately make, but I’d prefer if you would allow my officers and me to accompany the MACOs to the surface. We’re going after three individuals. I see no need to put members of your crew in harm’s way with us.”

She thought it over for a few moments, then replied, “Very well, Captain. Remember, though, we’re up here should you need us.”

“I’ll remember,” Kirk told her, nodding. “Thank you.”

The heavy dark blanket of a moonless night rolled out across the vast jungle far below as the twin MACO assault shuttles descended into the atmosphere and soared across the star-filled sky in near total silence. Even from inside the dimly lit troop cabin, Kirk could barely hear the small vessel’s engines with their tactical noise dampeners fully engaged, and no one

had spoken more than a few words since they left the *Alliance*, so the flight had been nearly as quiet as it had been long. Actually, it hadn't really been that long, of course—they'd only left the ship about twenty minutes ago—but it had sure seemed it. Kirk had built a reputation over the years for being a starship commander who could be depended on to complete his assigned mission successfully, oftentimes against near-impossible odds, and until he took the Romulan agents and their Section Thirty-One collaborator back in custody, he had no choice but to consider this particular mission a failure—salvageable, but a failure nonetheless.

At Colonel Finnegan's insistence, he, Spock, and Doctor McCoy had changed out of their regular uniforms and into MACO tactical fatigues—the colonel had rightly pointed out that even in the pitch-dark jungle their usual gold and blue might be spotted and compromise their presence and approach—and had joined him and his first squad aboard tac-shuttle-one, while second and third squads had taken tac-shuttle-two. While he still didn't like Finnegan very much—that would probably never change—he had to admit that the man seemed a very capable commander, and he already knew the men and women under the colonel's command respected him. Who knew? Their recent short-lived assignment aboard *Enterprise* had eased the tensions between Finnegan and him, at least a little bit. Maybe this mission would have the added benefit of...well...easing tensions a little further if not actually starting them on the road toward friendship.

"Colonel," the pilot called out suddenly, breaking the silence. "We've located a small area of relatively thin growth about two and a half kilometers southwest of the wreckage. It'll be a little tricky to land both shuttles there, but it appears to be the best option we've got. The terrain to the north and east is rocky and far too rough to land safely, and the next best choice in the jungle is over a dozen kilometers farther south."

"Two and a half kilometers should be far enough away for us to land without bein' detected," Finnegan opined, "assuming, o' course, that they did no' walk to the south or west after they crashed. Switch to blackout profile and head for that clearin', Lieutenant."

"I wouldn't exactly call it a clearing, sir, but will do."

With the flip of a pair of switches the cabin lights faded to maybe a tenth of their normal intensity and the exterior running lights, Kirk assumed, shut off completely. A few minutes later, as soon as the shuttle touched down with a slight nudge that he barely even felt, the MACOs unfastened their harnesses, rose to their feet, and started checking their weapons and equipment, all without the colonel having said a word.

"Good discipline," McCoy quietly observed as he stood up.

"The MACOs are a highly trained and disciplined body, Doctor," Spock informed him just as quietly as he and Kirk stood up as well.

Unlike regular shuttlecraft, the assault shuttles had doors on both sides, and as soon as they opened the MACOs filed out through both, one fire team to port, the other to starboard. Kirk and his officers followed Finnegan out through the portside to find that the second tac-shuttle had landed about twenty meters away and that second and third squads had already disembarked. No sooner had they stepped down onto the soft jungle floor when Colonel Finnegan turned to Kirk and handed him three small arrowhead-shaped devices, each with a pivoting semi-circular attachment.

"These are open-channel communicators," the colonel told them. "Clip 'em over yer ears and tap 'em twice to activate 'em."

Kirk accepted the devices and handed one each off to Spock and McCoy, then clipped his own over his left ear as they did the same.

The MACOs dispersed in a circle and moved a short way into the thicker underbrush until Kirk could barely see any of them anymore, forming a defensive perimeter around their landing zone. Then, at Finnegan's insistence, they all waited for the next several minutes in total silence, unmoving, looking and listening intently for any indication that someone might have observed their arrival. At first, Kirk had very nearly countermanded that order out of pure instinct, but he'd stopped himself at the last second and had instead taken a moment to look at the situation objectively. He and Finnegan were equals in grade if not in specific rank and Finnegan was a ground troop commander, whereas he commanded a starship. So, as long as Finnegan's orders didn't actually interfere with his mission, Kirk decided that he would yield to the colonel's experience.

As soon as Finnegan appeared satisfied that they were safe and hadn't been detected, he ordered his troops to assemble and prepare to move out. They returned to the immediate landing zone quickly and donned their helmets, and in less than a minute all three squads were ready to go. Finnegan then donned his own helmet and snapped his night-vision lens down into place over one eye. Then he powered up his tactical phaser-rifle and gave the order to move out. Kirk, Spock, and McCoy hadn't been given helmets and therefore didn't have any night-vision capability, but as long as they stayed close behind someone who did they would be all right. Nor had they been given phaser-rifles, though they did have their own type-II pistols. Their assignment should hostilities break out, Finnegan told them, was really quite simple. Duck and cover and wait for the shooting to stop.

Yeah, Kirk thought. Sure.

As each hour slowly passed into the next—moving stealthily through an alien jungle filled with unfamiliar trees, underbrush, and various other forms of plant life, some of which had shown a tendency to move on its own for no apparent reason, not to mention who knew what sorts of animal life, made for very slow going—one of the planet's four small moons finally rose and started climbing into the heavens somewhere off to their right. They couldn't see it through the still thick jungle, of course, but as it rose slowly toward its zenith, its bright orange-white glow began to filter down through sparse gaps in the heavy foliage overhead in ghostly rays that gave the jungle an almost haunted appearance. Soon Captain Kirk found that he could see several meters ahead of him rather than just the one or two he'd grown used to—a very welcome change for which he heard Doctor McCoy take a moment to whisper his sincerest thanks to Valhalla.

Early in their fourth hour they started finding remains of the wrecked vessel—parts or pieces of parts that appeared to have come from its warp nacelles or its phaser banks or its landing gear, most of them broken and unsalvageable, many of them partially burned, either by weapons fire or uncontrolled atmospheric reentry. Kirk knew from what communications he'd been able to overhear between Finnegan and his second and third squads, who were paralleling them and the first squad on their left and right flanks, that they were finding small pieces of wreckage along their paths as well. They might not have known exactly what they were going to find up ahead, but at least he knew they were heading in the right direction.

Not too many minutes later, the MACO sergeant who was leading them through the jungle stopped suddenly, raised his right fist in the air—he was holding his rifle in his left hand—and dropped to one knee. His comrades behind him, including Finnegan, halted where they were as well and crouched in place, so Kirk and his officers followed suit, as did the rest of the MACOs who were bringing up the rear behind them.

“Crash site just ahead,” he quietly reported over the comm. “About twenty meters. No interior lighting visible. No sign of any movement in the immediate area.”

“Tricorder,” Finnegan ordered.

“Scanning,” another of the MACOs replied—the young woman who’d been walking directly ahead of Kirk. She pulled her tactical tricorder from its pouch on her belt as she stood up, activated it—only a tiny point of dim green light confirmed that it was operating—and then held it out straight ahead of her. It barely made a sound. She turned to her left and then to her right, scanning a good hundred and twenty degree arc, then reported, “No energy emissions from the wreckage, Colonel. No life signs in the area aside from our own, and as far as I can tell we haven’t tripped any kind of perimeter security device.”

“All right,” Finnegan replied. “Keep yer eyes open, everyone. Let’s go.”

The MACOs and the *Enterprise* officers resumed their slow and cautiously quiet trek. Minutes later all three squads converged at the edge of the main debris field, the twisted and fractured fuselage at its center. They searched it quickly but carefully...and very thoroughly, Kirk noted with appreciation...then split into their individual squads once more and continued toward the large outcropping of rock that lay roughly another kilometer ahead when Kirk and Finnegan agreed that that was most likely where the fugitives would have headed, assuming that all three of them were ambulatory—possible shelter from the elements, not to mention the *Alliance*’s scanners, and protection from potential predators.

Before long the underbrush began to thin out and the jungle canopy to grow more sparse. The man in front picked up the pace as the resulting marked increase in moonlight lit their way more effectively. Still, they reached the rocky outcropping almost before they realized it and actually had to back off a few meters to maintain their cover.

Kirk looked up at the rocky face rising ahead of them as he knelt. It wasn’t particular high—maybe thirty meters at most at its highest point, certainly not what anyone would refer to as a mountain—but much of it stood hidden in deep shadows, any one or more of which might have been caves where the fugitives could have been hiding at that very moment.

“Tricorder,” Finnegan ordered as before, and as before the young woman ahead of Kirk started scanning.

A few moments later she reported, “I’m picking up low-level energy emissions from twenty degrees to our right, roughly eight to ten meters in elevation. Looks like a tricorder set to sentry mode, sitting just outside a cave.”

“We got ‘em,” Finnegan concluded. Then he made his way over to Kirk and knelt at his side. “Yer fugitives are hidin’ inside a cave, Jimmy-boy,” he said. “Its mouth is a natural chokepoint. They’re in there in the dark, and we’re all out here under the bloody moonlight. If we go traipsin’ up there they’ll see our silhouettes for sure, an’ if they’re armed they’ll put fire on us as sure as I be kneeling here beside yeh now.”

“You’re the combat commander, Colonel,” Kirk reminded him, albeit unnecessarily, swallowing his pride. “What do you suggest?”

Finnegan looked at Kirk as though he were surprised by the captain's willingness to hand him the decision so easily, which he no doubt was, then replied, "You an' yer officers wait right here, Jimmy. We'll bring 'em out." Then without waiting for Kirk to respond and before he could change his mind, Finnegan rose up and hurried off to rally his troops.

A few minutes later, a second moon rose over the eastern horizon and added its light to its brother's. From where they were waiting, the *Enterprise* officers could see everything that was going on. The young woman had apparently pinpointed the other tricorder's location with her own. Second squad scaled the rocks somewhere off to the left and were moving in on the cave from that side while third squad did the same from the right. Both squads stopped and held their positions just outside of the tricorder's sentry range while Finnegan led the first squad straight up from directly below—not the wisest approach as far as Kirk was concerned, but he had to believe the colonel knew what he was doing.

"I'll say this for the man," Kirk said to Spock and McCoy in a near whisper as they watched. "He leads from the front like a good commanding officer should." Then, even as he saw Spock look over at him out of the corner of his eye, he realized that somewhere along the way he'd stopped thinking of Finnegan as a former nemesis and started seeing him more as a fellow officer—a fellow leader. Progress, he supposed.

"There *are* those who would argue that a commanding officer is too valuable to the mission and should therefore not put himself in harm's way so unnecessarily," Spock pointed out, no doubt knowing very well that Kirk would hear his not so well hidden message loud and clear. Knowing his first officer as well as he did, Kirk had expected him to remark on his no doubt unexpected compliment of Finnegan, but the less than subtle reminder that he'd offered instead wasn't altogether surprising, either.

Finnegan stopped just outside the tricorder's sentry range, below the level of the cave floor, and brought his first squad up on line on either side of him. They spread themselves out several meters away from one another to avoid making themselves even easier targets than they already were, concealed themselves behind a variety of rocks, and then waited.

"*Second squad, report,*" the colonel ordered over the comm.

"*Second squad in position, sir,*" came the reply.

"*Third squad, report.*"

"*Third squad in position, sir.*"

"*Eyes and ears.*"

Kirk watched as the colonel started creeping onward and upward while his troops all held their positions. He shook his head in disbelief and admired the man's courage all at the same time. Rather than order one of his troops into a more dangerous situation unnecessarily, he'd taken it upon himself to be the one who would, very shortly, trip the tricorder's sentry alarm and alert the fugitives to his presence. If they were indeed armed, as Kirk and everyone else expected they were, Finnegan might very well get himself killed for his trouble.

The tricorder beeped and seconds later a bright red phaser beam lashed out from the darkness, narrowly missing Finnegan as he dove to one side, out of its path, just in the nick of time. All three MACO squads returned fire simultaneously, filling the shallower part of the cave with globular pulses and crisscrossing beams as they advanced on it.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" Finnegan shouted as soon as the incoming fire stopped. The MACOs' weapons fell silent as quickly as they had come to life. Then, rising up only slightly

from the small boulder behind which he had taken refuge, he shouted, “Attention, you inside the cave! This is Colonel Sean Gavin Finnegan of the United Federation of Planets’ Military Assault Command Operations! We have yeh covered from all sides! Yeh have no choice but to surrender! Throw out yer weapons an’ walk out with yer hands on yer heads!”

A few moments passed in silence—Kirk imagined the two Romulans were deciding how best to kill themselves, or whether or not they should take the Section Thirty-One agent with them. Then a phaser pistol suddenly flew out of the cave and clattered over the rocky hillside until it came to rest somewhere among the boulders. The human agent then followed a few seconds later, walking out with his hands one on top of the other atop his head, looking down, whether out of shame or simply to watch his footing, who knew? Then again, who cared, as long as he was surrendering? Three MACOs stepped out, two of them covering the cave entrance with their weapons while the third took the man into custody and quickly swept him aside, out of the line of fire

Would the Romulans fight to the death? Kirk wondered.

“Surrender now!” Finnegan shouted in at them as soon as his troops had moved the Thirty-One agent safely out of harm’s way. “Yeh have no other option!”

Yes they did, Kirk knew. They were “creatures of duty.” They could and likely would take their own lives.

As the seconds continued to tick by and no one else emerged, Kirk began to wonder if maybe they already *had* killed themselves—if they were lying dead inside the cave, waiting to be carried out. Then, just when he was about to suggest to Finnegan that he send a squad in after them, they emerged together, side-by-side, hands on their heads.

“It seems some Romulans interpret their duty in a different way,” Spock remarked as though he had been reading Kirk’s mind a few moments ago.

The MACOs took the Romulans into custody without further incident. Once they had been searched and were secured, Finnegan assigned a point man. Everyone fell into line and the long trek back to the shuttles began.

CHAPTER 13

As soon as they had secured their prisoners in their seats aboard tac-shuttle-one and lifted off from the planet surface, Captain Kirk had contacted Captain Montoya and requested permission to divert that shuttle to the *Enterprise* and unload and confine the prisoners there, as returning them to Earth was still his mission. Making it a request had been a matter of professional courtesy—the MACOs and their shuttles were assigned to her ship after all—but he had intended to do it regardless of how she responded, so was pleased when she told him that she was only too happy to let him have his prisoners as quickly as possible so that she could resume her previous mission. With her approval having been given, Colonel Finnegan had ordered the pilot to divert. He had done so, Kirk and his officers had disembarked with their prisoners, and the MACOs had left the *Enterprise* to return to the *Alliance*.

Kirk had ordered all three prisoners confined to the brig under double guard, but after changing out of the MACO fatigues and back into his regular uniform, and then taking a little time to rest and recuperate, he'd had security escort the Romulan woman to the briefing room to meet with him and Spock. After interrogating her for more than an hour, they had finally worn her down to the point where she gave them her name—Sub-lieutenant D’Vahn Charvon of the family Charvanek—and Spock had correctly identified the familial connection between her and the commander they had first encountered when they crossed into Romulan space on their mission to steal the cloaking device, but beyond that she had given them nothing. Kirk, however, wasn’t prepared to give up quite yet.

“We know your empire didn’t plan or carry out those attacks on its own,” he told her for the...well...he’d lost count of how many times he’d thrown that at her since he’d started pacing back and forth behind her while Spock just stared at her from directly across the table, where he sat with his hands folded in front of him. “We know you had inside help and we know where that help came from. We know your agency conspired with Section Thirty-One. I want the names of those involved on our side.”

“Ask me as many times as you will, Captain,” she said. “My answer will not change. I do not know any names and I have never heard of your so-called Section Thirty-One.”

Kirk stopped pacing and stood at the far end of the table, then turned around to face her directly. “How much do you know about Vulcans?” he asked her.

Charvon glanced briefly at Spock—her expression momentarily betrayed the fact that that question had caught her completely off guard—and then met the captain’s gaze. “What do you mean?” she asked him in return.

“I mean exactly what I asked, Sub-lieutenant,” he replied. “How much do you know about the Vulcan people?”

“I know that my people and theirs share a common ancestry, though our cultures are very different now,” she began, obviously still confused by the sudden change in Kirk’s line of questioning. “I know that they devote their lives to suppressing their emotions, that they generally have very disciplined minds...”

“Have you ever heard of the Vulcan mind-meld?” Kirk asked her, interrupting, which he knew from experience would help to keep her off balance.

She glanced at Spock again, who only stared back at her, then answered, “Yes.”

Unless he was mistaken, Kirk had just heard a little bit of worry find its way into her tone of voice. Good. “If you don’t start talking... If you don’t start telling me what I want to know, I’ll have Mister Spock extract the knowledge directly from your mind.”

She turned her eyes to Spock once more, staring deeply into his this time, but he only stared back at her, stoic and expressionless. She was concerned—perhaps even scared, which was exactly what Kirk wanted. “Mister Spock would not do that,” she said with more than a hint of nervous doubt evident in her voice. “Such an act may be strictly mental in nature, but it is a deep and very personal violation akin to physical rape. I know that much.”

She was right about that, Kirk knew. Akin to rape was *exactly* what it was, and he knew that Spock would resist committing such an act in any way that he could. But he also knew...at least, he hoped...that Spock would realize he was bluffing. “I’ll *order* him to do it,” he told her. As a Romulan, she certainly knew the meaning of orders.

“As first officer of the *Enterprise*,” Spock informed her before she could say anything else, “I am obligated to obey the orders of its commanding officer.”

She swallowed hard. “You would do that?” she asked him, now clearly afraid. “You would meld our minds by force? Against my will?”

“I would not choose to do so of my own volition,” he answered honestly. “However, attacks such as those that your empire recently launched against five Federation worlds must never be allowed to happen again. I am an officer in the Federation Starfleet, sworn to protect the Federation against harm. If there is a chance that forcing a mind-meld on you will reveal to us information that we can then use to bolster that protection, then it is my duty to do so if my commanding officer so orders.”

“You are bluffing,” she guessed, no doubt hopefully.

“Vulcans do not bluff,” Spock replied.

She dropped her gaze to the tabletop and sat in silence for the next several moments, obviously weighing her options. Kirk took that opportunity to exchange a quick glance with Spock and nodded slightly with approval, glad that his friend had picked up on his bluff...as if there had ever been any doubt. No, he would never order Spock to commit such an act, but those Section Thirty-One traitors *had* to be identified somehow. If this young Romulan agent stood her ground and didn’t talk, then he didn’t know what he was going to...

“All right,” Charvon said suddenly, jolting Kirk from his reverie. Then she looked up at him and admitted, “I *have* heard mention of your Section Thirty-One, but only in passing. From what little I have heard, I believe there *may* be some connection between them and the Rihannsu Tal-Shiar, but I do not positively *know* that to be true, and I certainly do not know any of the names that you are seeking.”

“All right,” Kirk said, deciding to change gears and take a different approach again, once more to keep her off balance. “Then tell us a little bit about yourself.”

“Myself?” she asked as she looked up at him, her renewed confusion showing through for one brief instant before she composed herself once more. “There is little to tell. Certainly nothing that will help you to advance your cause.”

“Humor me.”

“*Humor* you?” she asked, apparently not understanding.

“Tell him anyway,” Spock clarified, drawing her gaze back to him.

“Very well,” she replied. Then she looked back at Kirk, who stood in place and folded

his arms across his chest, ready to listen. "I am approximately twenty-four or twenty-five of your Terran years of age and I am the younger sister of former Commander Dion Charvon of the Rihansu Imperial Fleet, which you already know," she began. Then, glancing at Spock once more, if only briefly, no doubt still worried that he might 'mind-rape' her if so ordered, she continued, "I am an agent of the Tal-Shiar, which you have no doubt already concluded, though I am a *new* agent on my first covert mission. Even a Vulcan mind-meld will yield very little intelligence of any use to you. There is very little more to tell, none of which you would find to be of any consequence."

"Why would you, at best a young and inexperienced agent, take on such a dangerous mission?" Kirk asked her. "For that matter, why would the Tal-Shiar entrust you with it?"

"Those were the orders I was given," she answered simply. "Like your first officer, Captain, I have a duty to obey orders. We are, after all, creatures of duty."

"So I've heard," Kirk remarked. Then, in response to her questioning expression, he added, "The last Romulan officer who told me that was a commander in your fleet whom we had just defeated in battle. Things didn't end very well for him or for his crew, but if I'm to judge your people by his example, then your fellow agent's duty was to kill himself before we apprehended him. He failed to do so...twice. First on Parliament and then on that planet near the neutral zone border where *you* failed to do so as well. As far as I know, neither one of you even tried, so I'm forced to conclude that not all of you are as fanatically dedicated to that duty as the commander of that vessel was. I think there's more to your being selected for this mission than you're telling us."

"Perhaps so, Captain," she admitted, turning and facing in the other direction, almost visibly erecting a mental wall between them, "but I have said quite enough—much more than I should have."

"Are you refusing to answer any more questions?" Kirk asked her.

"I..." She hesitated, but then managed to reply. "I am."

"Very well." Kirk sighed and then looked at Spock. "Mister Spock?"

"Yes, Captain?" Spock responded without taking his eyes off of their guest.

"Are you prepared?"

"I am," he answered firmly.

Despite her resolve, Charvon looked across the table at Spock with genuine fear in her eyes. "You would not do such a thing," she told him as the Vulcan glared back at her.

"I will do as my captain commands," he replied. Then he stood up.

"All right!" Charvon shouted, cringing backward as far as her chair back would allow. "All right," she then repeated with a little more control.

"Sit down, Commander," Kirk told his first officer while he stared at the frightened young enemy agent. He almost felt sorry for her. He could only imagine the propaganda she had been subjected to growing up—could only guess at what kind of torture and interrogation techniques she'd been taught the Federation might use on her. How ironic. For all the harm those lies had no doubt caused over the past hundred years, now he could use them against her, at least for the moment.

After Spock had sat back down, Kirk looked her in the eye and told her, "That's the last time I stop him, D'Vahn. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Captain," she replied quickly. "I understand."

She was truly, genuinely afraid. "All right. Now tell me *everything*."

She drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, glancing at Spock again—she was clearly most afraid of what he could do to her. Then she began. "You are aware that my sister was returned to our home world recently?"

"Yes, I am," Kirk replied.

"What you might not be aware of is that upon her arrival home she was immediately disgraced, taken into custody and imprisoned, labeled a traitor to the empire and charged with treason for collaborating with you and helping the Federation to steal our cloaking device."

"But that's not what happened," Kirk told her, and from the look of relief that crossed her features, he guessed that she had never been sure of that fact until now. That, in turn, led him to the conclusion that, "You accepted this mission to help someone you considered to be a traitor to your people?"

She looked up at him once more. "Do you have any siblings, Captain?" she inquired. Then, before he could answer, she concluded, "Yes, I see from the expression on your face that you do...or that you once did. I was given a choice. I could refuse the mission and stand by while my sister was executed for her alleged crimes, or I could accept the mission and bring our agent home, in which case my sister would be allowed to live."

Kirk saw an opening—at least, a potential one. "But you *won't* be taking him home," he informed her, though she had no doubt guessed that already. Then, after taking a moment to gauge her reaction, he added, "And after impersonating a Starfleet officer and murdering members of my crew, you will return home in disgrace, eventually, just as your sister did. What will happen to you when that day finally comes?"

"I will have failed to complete my mission," she reminded him, "and to perform my final duty rather than be captured. I will likely be reduced in rank and assigned to a clerical post—perhaps even imprisoned for negligence."

"And you sister?"

"She will be convicted of treason and executed."

Figuring that that potential opening wasn't going to get any wider, Kirk dropped his arms to his sides and approached the young woman, paused for a moment, and then sat down beside her and took on a warmer, more compassionate demeanor. "As a starship commander, I'm authorized to offer you political asylum in the Federation if you'll do all you can to help us identify those in Section Thirty-One who conspired with the Tal-Shiar," he told her.

"As I already told you, Captain," she replied, meeting his gaze, "we are creatures of duty. And although I failed to perform my final duty, and by accepting your offer of asylum I would likely minimize the negative consequences of that failure, such a decision on my part would do nothing to help my sister. In fact, it would assure her death."

"And what if I offered our help in getting your sister out of custody and returning her here to be with you?" Kirk asked her, well aware that he was stretching the bounds of his authority almost to the breaking point. "Might that change your perspective?"

"It might," she admitted after a moment's hesitation, "if you could guarantee success, and if I had any information of value to give you."

"No one can guarantee success," he pointed out. "But I can offer you that help. I don't know exactly in what form it will come, but I make you that offer now. What do you say?"

"I need time to think about it," she answered after a moment.

“Of course.” He gestured toward the guards who had brought her in from the brig and stood by flanking the door the whole time and told them, “Return her to her cell.” Then when she stood up to go with them, he amended that order. “On second thought, take her to guest quarters and post a guard outside her door.” Finally, as the doors opened ahead of her, he told her, “You have until we arrive at Earth to decide, Sub-lieutenant.”

Spock stood up, waited until the guards had escorted her out and the doors had closed behind them—her hearing was likely as good as his, after all—then turned to Kirk. “Captain, if I may ask, how do you propose to convince Starfleet Command to mount a covert mission into Romulan space in clear violation of treaty to break Commander Charvon out of custody and return her to Federation space?”

“I have until we arrive at Earth to figure that out, Mister Spock,” Kirk replied.

Obviously taken aback, Spock stood even straighter and raised an eyebrow. “I see,” he said. “Then you were only...”

“*Bridge to Captain Kirk*,” Lieutenant Uhura’s voice called out over the intercom with urgency, interrupting Spock’s analysis of the situation.

Kirk pressed the switch in front of him. “Kirk here.”

“*Starfleet Command has just issued a fleet wide priority-one alert, sir*,” she reported. “*Dreadnought Federation reports multiple Klingon battlecruisers decloaking on both sides of the neutral zone border. All available Federation starships in the region are ordered to divert to that sector immediately.*”

“Yellow alert,” Kirk ordered as he stood up. “Set course and engage, best speed.” He closed the channel and headed for the exit with Spock right on his heels.

CHAPTER 14

Captain Kirk's breath caught in his throat and he had to force himself to swallow hard as the *Enterprise* soared in toward the Klingon neutral zone border and the delicate situation awaiting them became apparent on the main screen. It wasn't fear that caused that momentary start, though—he was certainly no stranger to battle. It was disappointment. Frustration. After all he and his crew had gone through lately to prevent a war with the Klingons, what he saw up on that screen now seemed to indicate that it had all been for nothing. The dreadnoughts *Alliance* and *Federation*, Starship *Lexington*, and three destroyers were currently deployed in a defensive formation and more or less surrounded by a sphere six Klingon battlecruisers and four birds-of-prey. No one was firing on anyone at the moment, but as *Enterprise* drew closer to the scene it became obvious that the apparent standoff had only just recently begun. Ships on both sides were showing signs of having taken moderate battle damage.

"All stop," Kirk ordered. "Maintain some distance for now."

"Answering all stop," Lieutenant DeSalle acknowledged from the helm as he dropped them out of warp and then stopped all forward momentum. Ensign Isel, once more manning the navigation station, reduced the screen's magnification to normal, thus allowing the image to encompass all of the vessels ahead.

The Lexington, Kirk observed. *That makes Commodore Wesley the ranking Starfleet officer there.* "Lieutenant Palmer, hail the *Lexington*."

"Aye, sir," Palmer acknowledged from communications. Then, a few moments later, she advised, "I have the commodore, Captain."

"On screen."

"*Welcome to the party, Jim,*" Wesley said as his image appeared on the screen. He looked tired but determined. "*Glad to see you could make it.*"

"Sorry we're a little late, Bob," Kirk replied. "What can we do to help?"

"*For the moment, stay put,*" Wesley replied, confirming for Kirk that he had done the right thing by stopping short of the immediate combat zone. "*I've managed to speak with my Klingon counterpart, one Captain Kang whom I believe you've dealt with before, and calm things down over here, at least for the time being, but I believe he's alerted their warlord to the situation.*"

"Yes, I *have* dealt with Kang before," Kirk confirmed. "He's pretty hardcore, but he can also be reasonable. Contacting Warlord Kargh might actually be the best thing he could have done for us. Has Kang told you why they crossed the border in the first place?"

"*He claims the dreadnought Federation crossed over to their side first and that they were merely responding to Starfleet's latest act of aggression. Captain Reynolds denies that, of course, and I believe him.*"

"As do I," Kirk agreed. "Josh wouldn't do that, but I don't think Kang would lie about it, either. That means something else is going on."

"*I'm inclined to agree with you, Jim,*" Wesley informed him. "*Reynolds also reported that his sensors showed Klingon vessels crossing over to our side, even while visual evidence indicated that not to be the case.*"

"So you believe ships on both sides were receiving false telemetry from a third party

at the same time,” Kirk concluded.

“Yes, I do,” Wesley confirmed, “*and there can’t be much doubt who’s responsible for it at this point.*”

“Agreed.”

“Captain,” Spock called from the science station, where he was standing and gazing into his scope, “sensors are picking up three more Klingon battlecruisers decloaking off our port-bow, just on their side of the border. One *K’Tinga*-class flanked by two D-sevens.” He straightened and looked over at the captain. “It is the *Dark Destroyer*, sir.”

Kirk turned back to Wesley’s image on the screen. “It seems you were right, sir. With your permission, I’ll take the lead with Kargh.”

“Permission granted, Captain,” Wesley replied. “*I’m well aware of how well the two of you know each other. Good luck.*”

“Same to you, sir. I’ll keep you informed. Kirk out.” He pressed the button on the arm of his chair to close the channel himself, but continued staring at the screen when he ordered, “Hail the *Dark Destroyer*, Lieutenant.”

“Sir, the *Dark Destroyer* is hailing us,” Palmer informed him.

“Very well. On screen.”

Kargh’s image appeared on the screen, already grimacing and glaring through angry eyes, as usual. “*Kirk. The Kitumba warned you what would happen if you encroached on our territory again,*” the warlord told him. “*Why do you work so hard to prevent invasion only to invite it again by violating our space?*”

“No one violated your space, Kargh,” Kirk replied quickly, “but I do know Captain Kang to be an honorable warrior and I don’t doubt that he believes someone did, just as the captain of our dreadnought *Federation* believes someone from your side violated *our* space.”

“*Does he?*” Kargh asked with obvious doubt.

“Yes, he does,” Kirk replied firmly. “His vessel’s sensors indicated to him that at least one Klingon vessel was crossing over to our side at the same time that Kang’s sensors were apparently showing him our vessel doing the same. Commodore Wesley and I suspect this was another Romulan trick designed to spark conflict between us—that *they* were responsible for the readings that both vessels’ sensors were reporting.”

“*On what evidence do you base this belief, Kirk?*” Kargh inquired, still doubtful but perhaps slightly less so.

“On their recent overt aggression,” Kirk answered as though that answer should have been obvious. “Come aboard my vessel, Kargh,” he then requested. “Sit down with me face-to-face and give me a chance to bring you up to speed on everything that’s been going on—on everything the Romulans have been doing lately. Afterwards, you can make an informed decision as to what to do next.” When Kargh didn’t reply right away, Kirk added, “Help me once more to prevent a devastating war that neither one of us wants, Kargh, just as you did back on Kronos.”

“*Very well, Kirk,*” Kargh finally replied after another moment. “*But I warn you...*”

“Captain,” Spock called out, interrupting. “Two more squadrons of Klingon D-seven battlecruisers have just decloaked and opened fire on our fleet.”

“Kargh!” Kirk shouted accusatorily.

“*They are not my forces, Kirk!*” Kargh shouted right back at him. “*They must be more*

Romulan p'tak! It seems your theory is correct!"

"Do you honestly believe the Romulans would repeat that mistake?" Kirk asked him, hoping for all their sakes that that was exactly what was happening.

"That is the last tactic that your people or mine would expect them to employ again so soon," Kargh replied, *"so yes! I believe they would!"*

The image of *Dark Destroyer* and her escorts suddenly returned to the screen, just as all three vessels veered off toward the battling fleets. They opened fire before Kirk even had a chance to order DeSalle to follow, but as soon as he did so and Isel switched the view back to the fleets, he saw that they had fired not on the Starfleet vessels, but rather on the D-sevens that had just arrived. "Red alert!" Kirk shouted. "All hands to battle stations!"

The klaxon wailed twice before someone silenced it, and as *Enterprise* swooped in to join the battle, Kirk heard the turbolift doors open and close behind him, but he was far too busy issuing orders in accordance with Commodore Wesley's incoming tactical commands to give a thought to who had just arrived. Whoever it was, they would take their station and do their duty.

Several minutes later—at least, it *seemed* like several minutes, though it might only have been two or three—as the starships and Kargh's fleet began coordinating their defenses and gaining the upper hand, another battlecruiser suddenly decloaked and joined the fray, this one obviously a Romulan warbird, as its head had been altered to resemble that of some sort of raptor.

"That is the *Talon*!" Kirk heard a woman shout from the back of the bridge. "That is Commander Tal's ship!"

Kirk looked back over his shoulder to find Chekov standing just outside the turbolift alcove with one hand grasping Sub-lieutenant Charvon's elbow firmly, holding her in place. "What's she doing on my bridge, Lieutenant?" he demanded to be told.

"I know this is irregular, Keptin, but she claims to have wital information for you," Chekov replied. "I tried to get her to tell me, but she insisted on telling you herself."

Kirk turned his glare to her, but she offered up her information even before he could ask for it. "Commander Tal is the one who conspired with your Federation's Section Thirty-One, Captain," she claimed. "The Warbird *Talon* is his vessel. If any records of his contacts in your government and their actions exist, they will be somewhere in that vessel's computer records and nowhere else."

"Five more starships have just arrived, Captain," Spock reported. "The dreadnought *Affiliation* and four destroyer escorts. Commodore Wesley has deployed them and they are engaging the enemy."

Five more starships. The Klingon and Federation fleets now had the clear advantage. "Mister DeSalle, withdraw from the combat zone," Kirk ordered. "Mister Spock, I want you to hack into the *Talon*'s computer and find those records. Mister Palmer, notify Commodore Wesley of what we're doing and then hail Kargh again."

His officers complied with his orders immediately, without question—they continued to make him proud—and moments later a smoke-filled, red-lit image of the *Dark Destroyer*'s bridge appeared on the screen, shaking erratically just as it came into focus. *"What do you want, Kirk?"* Kargh asked urgently, clearly annoyed.

"Order your forces not to fire on the *Talon*, Kargh," Kirk replied just as urgently. "We

need a few moments to break into their computer and retrieve some vital data that will prove everything they've done."

"Have you lost your mind, Earther? That is the Romulan command vessel! It is our primary target!"

"We need that data to prove..."

"Whatever you wish to prove is not my concern!" Kargh shouted. "Return to the fight or run like the coward you are! I shall not show them mercy!"

The view of the battle returned to the screen as Kargh closed the channel.

Assuming the sub-lieutenant was telling the truth, Kirk knew he had to retrieve that data. Without it he might never find the evidence he'd need to identify the traitors and bring them to justice. But how? If the Klingons destroyed that ship before... "Lieutenant Palmer, keep that channel open to the *Dark Destroyer*!" Kirk demanded as an idea struck him. "Send the following orders to all ships in the fleet, and *make sure* Kargh hears it."

"Ready, sir," Palmer said.

"Captain," Spock said, standing up straight and turning toward him, "I remind you that Commodore Wesley is presently in operational command. Our vessels' commanders will ignore any orders you might..."

"I'm aware of that, Mister Spock," Kirk told him, interrupting, "but Kargh might not be. Get back to work. We don't have a lot of time." Kirk paused just long enough to draw a deep breath—he knew without having to look over there that Spock was complying with his order—then proceeded with his plan. "This is Captain Kirk aboard *Enterprise* to all Starfleet vessels currently engaging Romulan warbirds along the Klingon neutral zone. If any Klingon vessels fire on the *Talon* in the next five minutes, you are ordered to redirect all offensive fire and annihilate the Klingon fleet, starting with the *Dark Destroyer*. I say again..."

"Kirk, this is Wesley! What the devil are you doing? No one's going to..."

"Trust me, Bob, I know exactly what I'm doing here," Kirk replied curtly. Then he resumed his play. "I say again... This is Captain Kirk aboard the *Enterprise* to all Starfleet vessels currently engaging the Romulan fleet along the Klingon neutral zone: If any Klingon vessels fire on the *Talon* in the next five minutes, you are ordered to redirect all offensive fire to annihilate the Klingon fleet, starting with the *Dark Destroyer*."

"Captain," DeSalle jumped in as he gazed into his tactical scope.

"Report, DeSalle," Kirk replied.

"Klingon forces are continuing to fire on the *Talon*, but they're shots are starting to miss...a lot! At best they're only scoring glancing blows!"

"Thank you, Kargh," Kirk replied, half-mumbling. Then, "Spock?"

"I have gained access to their main computer, Captain," Spock reported, once more gazing into his scope. "Still searching for the relevant data."

"Don't worry about searching for it now," Kirk ordered. "Copy everything you can—records, star charts, everything you can grab. We'll sort through it later."

"Already doing so, sir," Spock replied.

Seconds seemed like hours while Kirk waited and watched the battle play out on the viewscreen. One after another the Romulan warbirds took fire from all directions while they did their best to dish it out at the same time. Finally, Spock reported, "We have it, Captain."

Kirk punched the communications button on the arm of his chair almost before Spock

had finished speaking. “Kargh, this is Kirk. I got what I need. The *Talon* is all yours.”

Without bothering to reply, *Dark Destroyer* and most of the rest of the Klingon fleet turned their weapons on the Romulan command ship and pounded it from all directions. Seconds later, *Talon* and those remaining Romulan vessels that could still do so cloaked and retreated from the area.

Later, after most of the Klingon and Starfleet vessels had pulled back, away from the border, and after Kirk had filed his preliminary report and then briefed Commodore Wesley and obtained his approval—approval that Wesley had most likely gone to Admiral Withrow or perhaps even Admiral Nogura to obtain, given the sensitive nature of everything—Kirk hosted Warlord Kargh and two of his personal guard aboard the *Enterprise* to bring him up to speed, just as he had promised he would. He’d had them brought to the briefing room and had offered them food and drink, which they had dutifully declined. Their discreetly armed *Enterprise* security escorts had taken up positions just inside the door, while Kargh’s not so discreetly armed guards had positioned themselves at his sides, standing slightly behind him.

“Look at our encounters with one another over the past year, Kargh,” Kirk suggested after they had gotten the pleasantries out of the way and been talking for a few minutes. “You and I have worked together more than we have opposed each other, and things have worked out for the better for both of us every time. For us *and* for our two peoples.”

“What is your point, Kirk?” Kargh inquired impatiently.

“Just this, Kargh,” Kirk replied, resisting the urge to grin as he began to believe that Kargh’s impatience was more of a show for his guards at this point than it was a sign of his genuine feelings. The Klingon warlord didn’t want conflict between them anymore than Kirk did. He’d all but said so on more than one recent occasion. “Ours is an example that both of our peoples can follow. The past is the past. Future encounters between our forces need not be as adversarial as they have been in the past.”

“Spoken like the admittedly inferior of two opposing forces,” Kargh remarked. “Then he said, ‘Tell me what you asked me here to tell me, Kirk. I grow tired of your wordplay.’”

“All right,” Kirk agreed. “Some of this you already know, but you might not know all of it. It’s my hope that by sharing this information with you...”

“Get on with it, Kirk,” Kargh demanded, clearly beginning to lose what little patience he might have had.

“We both know that your empire has been seizing control of failing Federation colony worlds for some time now,” Kirk began, getting on with it as requested—if Kargh’s demand could be referred to as a request. “As a result of that, Section Thirty-One grew suspicious of your true intentions, apparently believing that your empire was building up its forces along the neutral zone in preparation of launching a full-scale invasion. That’s the real reason why Commander Blodgett’s team was researching bloodworms aboard the *Copernicus*. They were preparing to launch a preemptive strike. And that’s why, after that ultimately failed, thanks to us, they tried to assign MACOs to our ships and militarize our fleet.

“We later learned from our Tzhal’Thahn visitors that Section Thirty-One’s suspicions were correct—that your empire was, in fact, drawing up plans to invade the Federation. We know now that Malkthon was behind all that, but at the time we didn’t. We only knew that

your empire was planning to invade. But by then Thirty-One's plan to station combat troops throughout our fleet had already failed, so out of sheer desperation they made a deal with the Romulan Tal-Shiar.

"Our Epsilon-Nine station picked up communications traffic that confirmed what the Tzhal'Thahn had warned us about—that Klingon forces were massing along the border and that invasion was imminent. Soon afterwards my ship paid a visit to your home world, but of course you know all about that."

"I know about all of this, Kirk," Kargh interjected. "What is your point?"

"My point is that Malkthon acted dishonorably and then paid the ultimate price for his actions," Kirk replied. "Commander Blodgett and those who put him up to what he did acted dishonorably as well and he and his people are also paying the price for their actions. Those who put them up to those actions are not yet, but will be just as soon as we can identify them. As a result of all of their dishonorable acts, our Federation and your empire both fell victim to Romulan plots.

"As I said before, you and I have proven that we can work together, Kargh. I believe that if our two peoples can act honorably and work together in the same way, we can finally know true peace between us." Kargh's eyes narrowed slightly, but when he didn't respond Kirk added, "The first Romulan I ever encountered told me that perhaps in another reality he might have called me 'friend.' If a *Romulan* can see that, how much more clearly should a Klingon warlord be able to see the same thing? Help me to create that other reality for *our* two peoples right here, Kargh. Help me to end this years-long cold-war standoff between our governments once and for all."

Kargh gazed into Kirk's eyes for several more seconds, then asked him, "Would you truly have turned your fleet on my forces if we did not stop firing on the *Talon*?"

Kirk grinned slightly, then answered, "There was a time not long ago when my honest answer to that question would have been 'yes,' but that was then. This time I wouldn't have. I would not have risked undoing the progress toward true peace that we had made." He paused for a moment, and then added as his grin returned, "Besides, I wasn't actually in command of the fleet, so I couldn't have anyway." He also couldn't have described the expression that crossed Kargh's features at that moment, but if he hadn't known better he might have seen it as a look of admiration and respect.

"You were bluffing," Kargh concluded.

"Indeed I was," Kirk admitted freely. Then, steering their conversation back on track, he emphasized, "We're closer to peace right now than we've ever been before, Kargh. Why not go forward now and formalize the process? Why not bring our two governments together and ally ourselves by formal treaty?"

"Perhaps one day, Kirk," Kargh finally replied. "For now my government will turn its eyes to the Romulan Star Empire and observe its actions more closely than it has in recent years." He stood up. "Request permission to return to my vessel."

Kirk stood up as well, knowing that Kargh would see it as a return gesture of respect. "Permission granted, Warlord Kargh. Thank you for agreeing to see me. Until next time."

"Until next time, Kirk," Kargh echoed. Then something totally unexpected happened. For the first time ever as far as Kirk could recall, the Klingon warlord raised his fist to his chest in salute. He and his guards then turned their backs on him and departed, flanked by

their *Enterprise* security escorts, without another word, leaving Kirk speechless, but before the doors had time to close behind them, Sub-lieutenant Charvon walked in with Lieutenant Chekov at her side.

“Are you all right, Keptin?” Chekov asked him with a concerned look on his face.

“What?” Kirk asked him. “Oh...yeah, I’m...I’m fine.” He turned his eyes to the young Romulan woman and asked, “What can I do for you, Sub-lieutenant?”

“You promised to help my sister, Captain,” she reminded him.

“So I did.” he pressed a switch in front of him. “Kirk to bridge.”

“*Spock here.*”

“Have we received any response from Admiral Nogura yet, Mister Spock?”

“*Yes, sir,*” the first officer reported. “*The admiral has given his approval.*”

“Very well,” Kirk replied, more than a little surprised. “Set course to rendezvous with the *Alliance* back at the Romulan neutral zone. Ahead warp factor six. If you need me before we arrive, I’ll be in my quarters preparing my detailed report for Starfleet Command on the information you extracted from the *Talon*’s computer records.”

“*Understood, sir.*”

Kirk closed the channel, then explained to Charvon, “We’re on our way to rendezvous with the forces who will carry out the rescue mission. Until we get there, you’re free to make use of the ship’s recreational facilities as you wish, but be aware that security will continue to monitor your activities at all times.”

“Thank you, Captain. I promise to behave myself.”

EPILOGUE

Though the crisis was essentially over and most of the parties involved were already being dealt with, Admiral Nogura sat behind his desk, his morning's schedule cleared and his office door closed and locked, quietly reading over *Enterprise* Captain James Kirk's detailed report for the third or fourth time since he'd received it yesterday, just in case he might have missed something. Kirk's Vulcan first officer and computer expert, Commander Spock, had somehow managed to hack into the Warbird *Talon*'s main computer during that recent battle in the Klingon neutral zone sector and had extracted all of the Tal-Shiar leader's classified records, which the good folks over at Starfleet Intelligence had decrypted and translated and eventually determined did, in fact, identify Commander Tal's Section Thirty-One contact by name...more than a dozen times. That contact, a young agent with whom Nogura wasn't familiar—a young agent who had no doubt been selected to serve as Thirty-One's sacrificial lamb, should the need for one have arisen—had been arrested and subsequently interrogated, and had confessed to having worked directly with the Tal-Shiar in planning the recent attacks on Babel and the four founding Federation worlds. He'd claimed to have received his initial orders directly from Admiral Laura Roslyn, but stated that all subsequent orders had come to him through an intermediary whose identity he had never known. In the end, that young agent had provided all of the evidence that the Staff Judge Advocate needed to file charges and issue arrest warrants for Admiral Laura Roslyn and all four of her deputies. If only they had been able to identify that intermediary. Then they could have arrested him or her, too, and finally closed the book on the whole thing. Well...almost. The question of who had cleared the way for all those attacking forces remained as well.

Oh well. It's up to the criminal investigators and Intelligence officials to follow up on now. Nogura had other concerns. Chief among them, as a member of the Starfleet Command Admiralty he had to review the command staff personnel files and make recommendations to Starfleet Command as to who he thought should be selected to restaff Section Thirty-One. If it were up to him, of course, they would just eliminate the section altogether, but that wasn't his call to make, unfortunately. And truth be told, the section *did* have a legitimate reason to exist. He only hoped that whoever ultimately ended up sitting in those shadows might bring a little more light to them. He'd had quite enough of the cloak and dagger.

A thought suddenly struck him and he had to wonder why it hadn't crossed his mind earlier. He reached across his desk and pressed the intercom button.

"Yes, Admiral?" his executive assistant asked.

"Get me Captain MacLeod aboard the *Endeavour*," he ordered.

"Yes, sir."

After she had been held in Federation custody for more than a year, Captain MacLeod had quite suddenly been ordered to return Romulan Commander Dion Charvon to her people as part of a prisoner exchange. Might that, too, have been part of the conspiracy with the Tal-Shiar? A payoff to gain their cooperation, perhaps? Granted, the Federation had recovered one of its own in exchange, but still...had Section Thirty-One been behind that, too?

"I have Captain MacLeod, sir," Nogura's assistant advised him.

"Thank you." He switched over and an image of MacLeod sitting straight-backed and

proud in the center seat of his ship's bridge appeared on his monitor.

"Admiral Nogura," the captain greeted him. *"What can I do for you, sir?"*

"You recently participated in a prisoner exchange with the Romulans, Captain," the admiral reminded him, no doubt unnecessarily. "From whom specifically did you receive the order? I want a name."

"From Admiral Harry Morrow, sir," MacLeod replied.

"Directly or via a third party?"

"Face-to-face while I was standing in his office, sir. It's all in the record." MacLeod hesitated for a moment, then asked, *"Is there a problem, sir?"*

"No there isn't, Captain," Nogura replied. "I'm just following up on a few things. Thank you." He closed the channel, then switched over to call Morrow directly.

"Admiral Morrow here," the recent addition to the admiralty said when his smiling image appeared on the screen. Then, apparently recognizing Nogura, he added, *"Ah, good morning, Admiral. How are you, sir?"*

"Not entirely satisfied and busy, Harry," Nogura answered honestly, "so I'll get right to the point. You recently issued orders to Captain Chris MacLeod to transport Commander Dion Charvon back to her people aboard the *Endeavour*."

"In exchange for their releasing Federation Representative Robert Charles to us, yes, sir," Morrow confirmed.

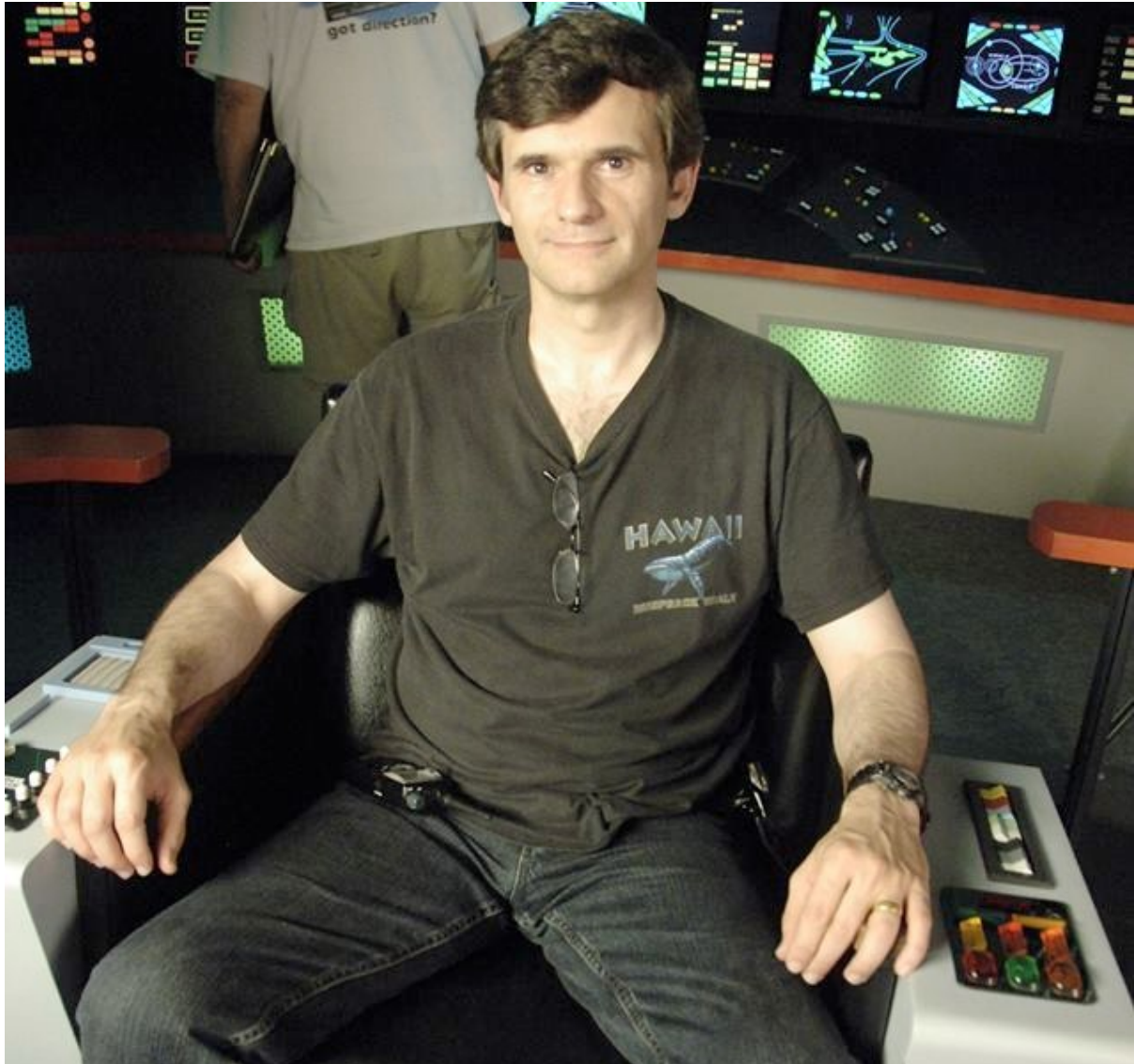
"From whom did you receive *your* orders to go forward with that mission?"

"From Starfleet Command through all the normal channels. Why do you ask?"

It figured. On its surface that prisoner exchange appeared to be a perfectly legitimate mission. With the orders having come from Command, proving that it had been anything more was going to be virtually impossible. Then again, maybe it *hadn't* been anything more. Maybe it hadn't been part of the conspiracy after all.

Nogura sighed quietly. "Never mind," he said in answer to Morrow's last question. Then, as an afterthought, he asked the younger admiral, "How would you like to take over as director of Section Thirty-One?"

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 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 new stories in eBook form (PDF and Kindle), 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.

STAR TREK ORIGINAL SERIES SET TOUR



If you ever wanted to experience what it would be like to visit the set of Star Trek: The Original Series, now is your chance. Star Trek super-fan James Cawley is honoring the 50th anniversary of the iconic franchise with the opening of his meticulously designed TOS set tour. Located in historic Ticonderoga, New York, and under license by CBS Consumer Products, the set tour brings memories to life by allowing fans to boldly go and tour the sets of the legendary Starship Enterprise.

Stage 9 at Desilu -- now Paramount Pictures -- in Hollywood comes back into focus, as the sets have been re-created exactly as they were laid at Desilu during the original run of TOS. Visitors can step onto the soundstage and be transported directly back to 1966. Additionally, beginning later this month, visitors will enjoy guided tours, photo opportunities and an immersive experience into the world of the classic television series.

Cawley started creating the sets in 1997 after receiving a copy of the original set blueprints from TOS costume designer William Ware Theiss. He then spent 15 years researching, crafting and refining his set replicas alongside other dedicated fans and craftspeople, including Trek alumni and fellow fans prop fabricator Ed Miarecki and concept designer and SFX supervisor Daren R. Dochterman.

Pouring over stills and frame captures from TOS and sourcing vintage materials and antiques, Cawley ensured that even the smallest details were accurately and lovingly reproduced. This spanned from an array of props to set decorations. The result is a stunning achievement offering the most complete and accurate reproduction of the original TOS standing sets.

“To me, there is no other franchise around that is more enjoyable and more socially relevant than Star Trek,” James Cawley said in a statement. “I’m very thankful for all the support I’ve received on this project and can’t wait to begin welcoming my fellow fans this summer.”

For more information about James Cawley’s Star Trek: The Original Series re-created sets and how to tour them - go to www.StarTrekTour.com

NEW VOYAGES FAN CLUB

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 additional 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. Membership requires registration and is free:

<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 Aleria 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>

<http://www.stnv.de>

Peter Walker

Freiburger Str. 17

50859 Cologne

Germany

peter@startreknewvoyages.de

Website Design

English Text

English captions/subtitles

Int. subtitle coordination

Video Editing/Conversion

eBooks

Stephan Mittelstrass

Bahnhofstr. 5

86825 Bad Wörishofen

Germany

stephan@startreknewvoyages.de

Graphic Design

German Text

German Subtitles

Further details available on our website: www.stnv.de

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