SOLDIERS OF PAWNS

Every hero comes from somewhere

SOLDIERS OF PAWNS

PART ONE

WAR AND PEACE

by

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&

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A Free Novel

to celebrate 50-Years

of

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CHAPTER 1

Riverside, Iowa

Trying his best to ignore the constantly shifting weight of all the books bouncing around inside his worn and dirt-stained old knapsack, eleven-year old Captain James Tiberius Kirk pedaled his bicycle hard into the field, squinting against the afternoon sun's glare as he watched the Federation starship *Kelvin's* backlit silhouette sail beneath the cirrus clouds that spanned the early spring skies over rural Riverside, Iowa like ribbons of cotton stretching from one horizon to the other.

The knapsack was a Christmas gift from his father from a couple of years back that had seen a lot of use, while the books were volumes that he'd pieced together himself containing everything that he'd been able to find in the world library about starship command, operations, engineering, battle tactics, and whatever else he could think of. He didn't understand it all, of course, but every little bit that he could pick up helped to make things more realistic whenever he and Gary and and anyone else he could enlist were "star trekking."

Star trekking. His mother's creation. One day a few months back he'd lost track of time and forgotten to go home when he was supposed to, and she had come out to find him. She'd had every intention of admonishing him over it, but apparently when she'd found him, still playing with his friends, she'd stood quietly by and watched them for a while before interrupting. Then, as they walked home together, she had suggested that he might turn his little space adventures into short stories. She'd known that he liked to read, so why not try writing as well? The idea had definitely interested him, and they'd tossed around some titles as they walked.

Everything from Star Odyssey, Star Wars to Starlost to Starfleet, had been bandied back and forth when his face had suddenly lit up and he'd suggested the two

most perfect words: Star Tracking. Only moments earlier, she had scolded him for "tracking off into the woods God knows where" and forcing her to have to "track out after him."

"Trek-king," she smiled as she corrected him mid-step.

"Trek-king?" the word felt strange in his mouth as he pronounced it a couple times.

"Trekking. To trek. To journey," she elaborated. "Star Trekking."

"Star Trekking," he repeated her. It sounded good. So, Star Trekking it would be.

He looked up at the *Kelvin* as it trekked through space. The ship was, in reality, only a small model that he was holding out ahead of him as far as he could reach without losing control of his bicycle, pinching her single warp nacelle securely between his thumb and forefinger. One of Starfleet's most famous vessels, *Kelvin* soared to the far reaches of space and beyond; her valiant crew on their way to carry out one more vital life-or-death mission.

He gripped the twisting and jerking handlebars of his bike tightly in his other hand and shoved his heels furiously against the pedals as he bounced and swerved over the semi-soft soil toward the old Northern Red Oak tree that stood watch, solitary but vigilant, over his family's farm from its place near the center of the expansive field. Its location had always been an inconvenience, especially at harvest time, when the harvesters had to break their pattern to avoid it. But it had been there for over a hundred years—maybe more. One had to respect that. It had survived every known assault that man and nature could level against it. To remove it now had felt somehow morally wrong, so remain it had.

Still more than a football field's length ahead, James could already see that although its branches were still winter-bare, thousands of tiny lime green buds had already begun to appear among them, signaling the winter's end and bringing with them the promise that spring would soon take hold.

Winter. The word stood more as a simple definition than it did a description. There were no real winters anymore. There was warmer weather and there was

cooler weather, but temperatures during the cooler months rarely if ever fell below ten degrees Celsius. 'Winter' was simply the longest stretch of the cooler weather with fewer hours of daylight, recognized more by dates on the calendar than by the weather it wrought, and it often felt like early spring or late fall, depending on one's particular preference of the day. He had simplified it further as the months when one drank lemonade or apple cider.

It hadn't always been that way, of course. Fourth grade history class had taught James that in the centuries before the last of the world's non-polar glaciers melted away, the American Midwest had been known for its brutally cold and snowy winters. Blizzards powerful enough to shut down travel and trap families inside their homes had not been uncommon in those winters of yore. Not anymore. Not for the last hundred and fifty years or so, in fact. The final crystals of the last non-polar ice had melted away somewhere in the Himalayas late in the mid twenty-first century. After climate shift became all but a moot point, deserts had become rainy and equatorial rainforests had become deserts. Following the melt-off of freshwater ice, conflicts over fresh water sources had erupted on a global scale, and by the later mid-twenty-first century, the third world war broke out. The only valiant holdout was Antarctica, which despite its sandy shorelines seeing sunlight for the first time in eons, clung tenaciously to its inland ice cap. Much of it was accelerated by ice harvesters, who, before the late-twenty-first century treaties, cut and removed huge portions of the ice shelves to quench a thirsty planet.

Yes, James Kirk actually did pay attention in school. As a matter of fact, he paid such close attention that some of his classmates had taken to calling him a bookworm. He couldn't help it, though. He enjoyed learning new things. He enjoyed learning new things a lot. He really hated the name-calling, though, and found himself drawn into fisticuffs on a regular basis. As a result, he and his school's principal had become "pals" in an odd sort of way through his regular visits to his office. In fact, his principal, upon learning his interest in reading anything and everything he could on some new subject, would scour the archives of nearby book depositories to provide him with a new book that had somehow survived the digital apocalypse.

His last interest, chemistry, was spawned following the discovery of an unexploded firework the previous July 4th. The idea that seemingly harmless materials could be brought together to explode so dramatically fascinated him to no end. Principal Carter rustled him up a very old and very thick university chemistry textbook from the late 1990's. Within a week he had assembled various materials from household items to build a cannon. Unfortunately it had misfired and had blown out a large portion of fence near the house. Shortly after that, his father had introduced him to the skills of carpentry.

But here was this Red Oak. Throughout a history that spanned far beyond his own years on Earth, beyond his father's years, and even beyond his grandfather's years—some one-hundred fifty years—this proud, lonely tree had beaten the odds. Little did it know that one day it would become an entire planet in the imaginative mind of a young boy.

"Captain's log," young Captain James Tiberius Kirk began, his voice vibrating with every sudden jolt as his bicycle tires bounced on the rough, uneven terrain, "We're responding to an urgent distress call from the Federation outpost on Delta Vega, which is under attack by a Klingon battlecruiser."

Something caught the corner of his eye. His gaze darted briefly to one side. An ominous looking dark gray mountain range of cumulonimbus storm clouds was drifting slowly toward him from across the clear blue sky. But he couldn't concern himself with that right now. He was on a vital mission.

He slowed to impulse as he approached Red Oak planet and then turned his front wheel to bring the *Kelvin* into orbit.

"Standard orbit, Skipper," he reported, changing his voice to a falsetto impression of some other imaginary *Kelvin* crewmember.

"Tactical!" he then barked in his own voice as he gazed at the *Kelvin*, now in full orbit. A good starship captain was always alert for the the unexpected.

"Space is clear in this sector, Skipper," someone reported back. "Scanners detect no vessels."

"Can you raise the outpost?" he asked.

"No, sir," the comms officer replied. "Still no reply. Just the automated emergency beacon."

"Emergency response teams are assembled in the transporter room, Skipper," another imaginary crew member advised, just a tone or so off from James' own voice. "Awaiting your orders."

James jammed his foot on the brakes and the bike skidded to a halt. Once again, he'd come to the point his father had often described to him as a 'divergence in theory'—in reality, a point where he and Gary could never agree on what to do next.

Gary Mitchell was his very best friend in the whole world, but Gary's solution to any situation was always to beam down fully armed and attack the bad guys. James, on the other hand, had always preferred to strategize over his next move. Certainly force was always an option, but not if cooler heads could prevail. Unfortunately Gary was not one of those cooler heads. Gary was impatient to such a point where he would become totally frustrated. "You're ruining it!" he usually exploded. "How come we can't just beam down and kick ass?"

This, of course, was exactly the reason why he was playing alone today. Gary wasn't exactly the deepest of thinkers, and when their pretend distress signal from Delta Vega had come in yesterday, he'd told Gary exactly that after Gary suggested they photon Delta Vega into oblivion. He'd heard his father use that exact phrase when talking about someone once. Now, one day and one fat lip later, he was playing Star Trek by himself. Of course Gary had a corresponding black eye to show for his contribution to the disagreement.

No, Gary wasn't a deep thinker at all. James had tried to teach him Chess over Christmas vacation, but finally gave up when Gary refused to understand why a player couldn't just capture the king to win the game. James had tried to explain it to him, but there was simply no reasoning with Gary once he got an idea in his head

Thus had ended Gary's brief interest in Chess.

James shoved his foot on the pedal again, and with a couple twists of the bike handle, began to slowly circle the tree—rather *Kelvin* had resumed standard orbit.

"Should I alert the transporter room?" some crew member suggested in his head—a voice that sounded a lot like Gary's.

"Negative. It could be a trap," he countered. But there was no way of knowing what had happened unless he beamed down. Obviously something had happened to the base personnel, but what?

The no-win scenario. The dreaded *Kobayashi Maru* test of command character and capability had become almost legendary in the halls of Starfleet Academy. It stood like a matching pillar right alongside the Prime Directive. It was the final exam for all command-track cadets. Other than the groans and complaints that often followed any conversation about it, it was a closely guarded secret. It was something everybody talked about, but nobody talked about. "Everyone's always not talking about it all the time," his father's best friend and fellow *Farragut* officer, Varian Cain, often quipped.

The *Kobayashi Maru*, or the Koby as it was often referred to in conversation, had been a part of Starfleet since Starfleet's inception. Some people said that its roots reached all the way back to the seafaring ships of Earth's naval history. Others claimed that it was a Vulcan creation designed to torture humans. But regardless from where it had come, command-track cadets who hadn't taken the Koby feared it, while those who had were sworn to a lifetime of secrecy.

Flash-flash—RUMBLE! A louder and much closer clap of thunder shook his entire body, startling him, practically making his teeth rattle. He slammed on his brakes and brought his front tire to an abrupt halt a few yards from the Red Oak, throwing both feet to the ground quickly to avoid falling over as the thunder continued rumbling and rattling off into the distance. His whole body felt tingly and he noticed that all the fine little hairs on his arms were standing straight on end. That last strike had been a close one!

He peered up at the no longer so distant range of mountainous dark gray thunderheads towering almost directly overhead. The storm was going to be a big one, but the weather drones would quickly take care of it. Meanwhile, he was Captain

James Tiberius Kirk, commanding officer of the Federation starship *Kelvin*, and he had a vital mission to accomplish. He turned his gaze back to the *Kelvin* and held it aloft once more.

He reached back into his knapsack's small side pocket and pulled out his model Klingon D-5 warship, which didn't waste any time in warping into the *Kelvin's* orbital sector. Charging its forward disruptors and its torpedo launchers, it swooped in from the *Kelvin's* portside aft and attacked. In the sky above, lightning flickered and thunder rumbled.

"Red alert!" James yelled in his own voice. "Battle stations!"

The warship struck with another rapid flash of lightning—disruptor fire—accompanied almost immediately by a deep cannonade of thunder.

"Aft shields depolarizing, Captain!" another bridge officer yelled in his head.

"Hit on the aft nacelle!" he voiced in the previous tone. Then he continued, "We're venting plasma!"

The Klingon warship sailed past the *Kelvin*…

Everything went blinding white. A thunderous concussion hurled him backward. He felt the impact the uneven dirt clods dig into his back when he hit the ground, where for several seconds he stared upward, trying to make sense of the swirling gray-green clouds in the sky above. His hand hurt. Looking right, he discovered his fist was clenched tightly around his model *Kelvin*. Looking left, his fist was likewise clenched so tightly his fingernails dug into his palm. Unfortunately the Klingon warship was nowhere to be found as he unfurled his aching fingers.

There was a strange smell to the air. Something was burning—wood. He recognized the smell. It reminded him of his grandfather's big stone fireplace in Gettysburg. He sat up, leaned on his arms, bracing himself on his palms, which sank in the moist, cold dirt.

The old Red Oak! A tremendous bolt of lightning had struck it and split it asunder from top to bottom. Both halves were leaning away from each other at impossible angles, with orange, flames dancing and sparks popping along their newly ex-

posed innards, spewing columns of swirling smoke up into the ever darkening storm-filled sky, and as he stared at it in disbelief, feeling an odd sense of loss, one half of the slowly dying tree, apparently unable to withstand the burden of its own redistributed weight any longer, suddenly tore from its sinews and crashed to the ground, directly on top of his bicycle.

"No!" James screamed angrily. Sure, he'd liked the old tree and felt sorry to see it destroyed, but that was his bike!

He leapt to his feet and ran to the burning tree. He thrust his hands in through the broken limbs that he knew were crushing his bicycle. The wind wailed, the lightning flashed, and the thunder rumbled all around him as the stiff tangled branches scratched his bare arms raw. His fingers were within an inch of touching the handlebars but he could push no further.

The tree clawed at his forearms like an angry bobcat, but he had to save his bike. He pulled his arms out and with even stronger force, rammed his bleeding arms in through the twisted and tangled branches, scratching new trails of blood every time, even as large, heavy raindrops began pelting him with steadily increasing intensity. This time his palms hit the cold metal of the handlebars, which were already wet from the rain. Gripping the chrome, he yanked hard. The handlebar gave maybe an inch in any one direction. He dropped his right hand to grip the crossbar and yanked hard again.

"Oh come on!" he yelled in frustration as he tugged relentlessly. "Come… on...you...stupid..."

And then, wet and slippery from the falling rain, the handlebar spun suddenly and slipped from his grasp. The inertia caused his other hand to slip from the crossbar and James launched backward to fall the ground with a heavy thud, his tailbone deep in the now muddy, lumpy dirt.

He glared angrily at his defiant bicycle, almost as though it had intentionally betrayed him. He wiped one scratched and bleeding arm across his face, then pushed himself up off of the ground. His anger gave way to knowledge that he was not going to be able to rescue his bike alone. As the rivulets of rainwater streamed off his wet hair and down his face, be backstepped a few paces, then

turned and started jogging off toward the distant house, his shows sinking and sliding in the mud as he ran. Suddenly he noticed that the sky had turned an odd grayish-green and that the rain had turned to hard, icy, pea-sized hailstones...which hurt as they popped off his head and the back of his neck. All around him the icy pebbles snapped, rattled, pinged, and bounced off the ground.

Suddenly he knew exactly what was happening. The weather network had failed—malfunctioned. This storm was going to have its way. There was suddenly a shift in the wind direction, which drafted past his whole body and behind him. He stopped running and slowed to a complete standstill. His shoes sank into the thick muddy dirt. He turned, slowly but deliberately around.

A mile high or more into the ominous, storm cloud-darkened skies, maybe a football field or so behind him a massive blue-gray funnel cloud swirled with the thunder of a freight train, clawing furiously at the ground, dragging with it a quarter-mile-wide dark gray cloud of dust and dirt, hurling earth and debris in every direction, some of it right toward him, as it inflicted explosive chaos and utter destruction to anything in its path.

He felt no rush of adrenaline. He felt no apprehension. His heart wasn't beating relentlessly. Nothing physical at all. Whatever it was, it was familiar. He'd felt it before. Rather, he'd felt that familiar lack of feeling before. He knew something he was supposed to be feeling he was not. It was like an unsolved mystery with few clues other than curiosity. That's it. Yes, he knew he should be feeling afraid. Standing there, watching the approaching tornado, he knew that he should have been afraid, but he wasn't. To him, 'fear' was just a word, nothing more. A placeholder.

Anger. Now that was something that he could understand. Fear, he could not. Panic, he could not. A neighbor's dog had once taken offense at his mere presence and had charged him, but instead of running away, James had simply stood his ground—not defiantly, but with that same twinge of curiosity. It had so spooked the dog that by the time it drew to within biting distance it had lost its vicious demeanor. It had just stood there in front of him and gazed into his curious eyes. He'd been lucky, his older brother, Sam, had told him later. Then, of course, he'd

called him an idiot for perhaps the millionth time in James' six short years of life. Sam never missed an opportunity to call him an idiot.

To him, to experience fear was like a person suffering from color-blindness to discern red or blue. They were just mere concepts.

The angry mammoth tornado still bearing down on him, however, was neither red nor blue. It was an easily perceptible black and gray, and it had already chewed up another hundred yards of farmland while he'd been pondering the meaning of fear. He watched with interest as it ripped the remains of that noble Red Oak violently from the ground, finishing what the lightening had begun, and pulled it high up into the maul of the tornado—the twisted remains of his bicycle along with it. His imagination lost a starship and an entire planet in one fell swoop.

And then the strangest thing happened. James started walking toward Mother Nature's angry tantrum. Slowly and deliberately, transfixed by the awesome raw power contained within it, he put one slow step in front of the other. He could feel his body become lighter as the billowing of inflowing air began to embrace him aloft. He was going to fly. Then there was this wrenching, far from gentle yank that lifted him off his feet.

"I got him!" he heard a familiar voice yell from behind him over the tornado's increasingly loud and thunderous roar. It sounded very distant, but he'd heard it well enough to know that it was Sam.

Sam beat the swirling beast by mere seconds. He snatched young James by his knapsack, out of the air as much as off of his feet, and in one motion hurled him behind him onto the back of his saddle, while at the same time he turned his horse around and heeled it into an urgent full-on gallop away from the monstrous twister. "Mom!" he yelled into the small transmitter that he was wearing on his wrist as James grabbed the sides of his jacket and held on tight. "It's heading right for the house! Get down into the cellar! Get down there now!"

James gazed back over his shoulder at the goliath twister. It seemed almost to be stalking him now—angry that James had been torn from its spiraling embrace— tearing a raw swath through the earth—chasing him. Sam's horse was gal-

loping fast—very fast—probably as fast as it could—but that didn't appear to be fast enough. He was starting to feel dirt and other fine gritty debris stinging his face as Mother Nature's angry flailing hands swung at him from behind. He locked his gaze forward, toward the house and the barn.

They weren't going to make it.

"Hold on!" Sam yelled over the almost unbearably loud roar as he reined his horse sharply to the right to gallop at a right angle to the monstrous twister.

She was furious now. She wasn't going to be denied her prey. James started feeling larger pricks stinging his sides and the backs of his shoulders and legs—everywhere that his knapsack wasn't protecting him—as they rode hard and rough. He wondered how long the horse would be able to run at that speed before fatigue slowed it down.

Flying debris pelted him harder and harder until the stinging pain became almost unbearable. It reminded him of the time Gary nailed him in the shoulder with his slingshot. This was like a hundred Gary's slingshotting him over and over. He pressed his face into Sam's back to protect his eyes, and he smelled a strange moist odor of soil and sweat as a sudden darkness enveloped him.

After what had seemed like an eternity, James realized that he was no longer feeling the painful sting of flying debris striking him. Then he noticed that Sam's horse was slowing down. He could still hear the howling wind, but its volume was decreasing. Slowly, tentatively, he unclasped his eyelids, which struggled to do so, glued together with grit and mud. He wiped his face on the back of Sam's jacket and turned his gaze toward the farm—or where it was supposed to be.

But where the family farmhouse and its barn had once stood, now stood only scattered piles of wreckage amid foundations. Utter destruction.

It was gone. It was all gone.

"You idiot!" Sam yelled back at him. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

CHAPTER 2

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Having survived the "lightning storm" that had destroyed the *Kelvin* and her Klingon attackers a couple months before, Captain James T. Kirk had faced a Board of Inquiry, had been declared not at fault by a panel of his peers, and had been transferred to command the newer and much more advanced starship *Farragut*.

Well of course his real father had actually prevented the catastrophe of *Kelvin* being destroyed that day almost twelve years ago, when that strange space storm appeared and then disappeared almost as quickly. Both his father and his mother were aboard actually. In fact, his mother had joked to young James many times, 'that was the day you were almost born.' She wasn't joking in one sense, because the strange space phenomenon had caused his mother to go into false labor with him. Luckily her would-be labor subsided as quickly as the space storm and he was born on terra-firma…well not so much firma after another storm all but obliterated their former Iowa home. Ironic.

Leaning forward where he sat, young James rubbed his chin thoughtfully as he weighed his options. Then he gazed straight ahead at the viewport. Well, okay, the captain's chair was really just a tree stump in the middle of a small clearing in the woods, and the forward looking viewport was really just a tangle of broken and upended, dirt-caked roots of a fallen tree about ten feet in front of him. But in his mind's eye he saw the bridge of the last starship that his father had last commanded before he left Starfleet: the Constitution-class *Farragut*.

Despite the fact that last night's rain had softened it up a little bit, the cool flat stump was really starting to gnaw on his tail bone. The fact that it wasn't exactly

level didn't help matters, either. Then there were the gnats…ever so insistent on flying into his ears and occasionally up his nose.

"We are prepared to beam down and begin final preparations for the arrival of the negotiating team," he finally informed some alien political leader, whose imaginary image filled the imaginary viewport. "*Farragut* out."

He turned to his exec by his side.

"Inform the transporter room to stand by."

"Aye sir," Annie spoke from her place where she stood.

Annie Keller was a pretty girl—a very pretty girl. She was only a few months younger than he was, and had the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen. A pale, translucent aquamarine, they looked like the shallow, clear waters of a Caribbean lagoon, especially when the sun caught them just right. Her tanned face was sun-kissed to a golden-brown, with summertime freckles beneath her eyes that made them even more iridescent.

She was wearing his mother's old blue Starfleet shirt that James had talked her into letting him have. It was a little bit large and hung loose on her slim eleven-year old frame, but she still looked great in it.

A wayward strand of her shiny, sun-streaked blond hair, which she wore long and straight, with bangs across her forehead, had just cast itself across her jaw and caught the corner of her mouth without her knowing. Her slender body had already started to reveal hints of the feminine curves she would eventually grow into, and there was a rasp her voice that mesmerized him when she talked.

"What?" she looked at him. He had been staring. Again. He blinked a couple times. Did she know he liked her? He stood up and proudly straightened his oversized gold Starfleet shirt—one of his father's older ones that didn't fit him anymore—one of the first ones that he'd been issued upon his assignment to the Farragut.

"Inform the transporter room—" No, he'd already said that. He looked curiously past her, then glanced around. "Where's Gary?"

"Gary—" a boyish voice began to his other side, "…had to boldly go."

James turned to see Gary as he stumbled out through a thicket of overgrowth wearing a somewhat worn and faded Starfleet Services shirt. It was another of his father's old uniform shirts—a red one. Gary was never serious. He seemed to be perpetually joking around about one thing or another, and had an almost permanent troublemaker's smirk on his face. His short-cropped brown hair was somewhat mussed from earlier when he'd accidentally walked through a spider web that hung between two trees. He had freaked out and had started frantically brushing and smacking his hands through his hair in efforts to get the webbing and unseen beastly arachnid off. The poor spider was never found, but Gary had continued to have phantom moments where he thought he felt crawling one place or another. It was comical to watch.

Gary's right foot caught on a tree root with a thunk as he walked, causing him to slightly stumble. He noticed James was giving him a look.

"What?"

James frowned at his friend.

"Like I missed something? We're beaming down, right? Again?"

"Yes," James shot back, short and to the point, giving Gary's sarcasm short shrift.

"Will we be armed this time? Because I'm getting really tired of getting killed." He pointed at the sleeve of his red shirt. "I think it's this damn shirt—I swear." He pointed at Annie. "How come she gets to wear that shirt now?"

James sighed. Then, ignoring Gary, he turned his gaze back to Annie and said, "Alert transporter room one."

"If that's on the starboard side, I'd suggest transporter room two," Gary stated with as deadpan an expression as he could muster, just barely hiding the ever so slightest smirk. "Pretty sure I number-one'd in number one." Then he attempted to hide it no longer as a grin swept across his face. James thought seriously for a moment about smacking it off, but then decided that he didn't want to get into a

fight with his best friend, especially on their last day together until next summer most likely—and especially not in front of Annie. She didn't like fights. She told him as much.

Kirk gestured sharply right, then left. "*Starboard*. *Port*. It's really not that hard, Gary." And with nothing more than a quiet dismissive shake of his head, he stood and started toward a cluster of saplings that had been designated as the elevator. Annie fell quickly in step behind him.

"Transporter room—number two," James stated to the imaginary computer followed by shooting a glare at Gary, who responded with a quick raise of his eyebrows followed by a shrug of feigned innocence. A few moments of elevator silence was finally broken by Gary.

"Maybe we stop at the ship's flower shop and pick up something nice for the aliens?" Gary added in a helpful tone that in no way was intended to disguise his sarcasm.

James burned a sidelong glare at him. "Why do you always want to talk in the elevator?"

"Because it's the one place I can get anybody to listen to me," Gary snapped back, punctuating his words with another sidelong glance at Annie. "Back in Iowa I wore that shirt."

"Well, we're not in Iowa are we?" James intoned.

"You're missing the point," Gary muttered.

"Because there isn't one maybe?" Kirk snapped right back.

Annie knew better than to try to contribute anything in the middle of one of James' and Gary's arguments. She'd only met Gary less than a month ago when he came to spend August with the Jim, but she had sized him up on the very first day. She knew better than to come between best friends who were about to beat each other's brains out...not that she actually believed Gary had any brains to be beaten out.

James turned away and stepped away, indicating that their imaginary elevator ride had ended.

Transporter room number two was actually an open patch of ground where it just so happened that shafts of golden sunlight streamed brilliantly down through the lush summertime foliage. Annie followed him, but Gary just stood there and occupied himself by kicking gently at a stone he'd spotted sitting beside the toe of his shoe.

James turned to look at him.

"What?" Gary said almost immediately as he looked up and noticed his stare. Then he pretended to give an order. "Mitchell to *Farragut*. Beam us down."

James sighed once more and looked down at the ground for a moment, his frustration growing. Then he looked up at his friend, and with a calm tone he spoke. "First—you're still in the elevator. Second—we're still on the ship. You don't call the ship to beam down. You call it to beam up."

"Whatever." Gary rasped harshly, starting to lose his temper. "We've been beaming up and down all day—between which I've been getting killed all day!"

"Whatever, Gary," James replied, throwing his friend's favorite word of choice back at him, knowing that he didn't need to remind him of what had happened the last time Gary had pushed him too far. "And just so you know, you can't talk while you're beaming, either."

"I'm still in the elevator," Gary pointed at the ground by his feet.

"Actually, you can," Annie pointed out helpfully, forgetting not to contribute. Both boys looked over at her. She looked back at them, read the unvoiced questions on their faces, and then stumbled in her clarification, "Talk—while beaming. My dad says you can."

"Really?" James finally asked with a quizzical look on his face.

"Oh, for God's sake!" Gary surrendered, stepping out of the elevator. "Let's beam the hell down so I can die already!"

"There's no cussing in Starfleet," Annie informed him, letting the words escape before she could catch them.

Gary glared at her, then turned to James. "You can come visit me next summer."

And then the silence set in. For James the mood was gone, for good this time. Gary hadn't wanted to play Star Trek anyway. He felt a twinge of guilt at pushing it on him—not to mention including Annie. He gazed down at the ground in front of him while Gary's eyes fixed upon another stone to roll beneath his shoe, leaving poor Annie alone to her own thoughts as a choir of cicadas sang their monotonous chorus.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Annie said, finally breaking the silence with an apologetic sigh. "I have to go home."

James raised sad eyes to meet hers.

"What? No wedding today?" Gary muttered under his breath as his focus shifted indifferently to the distant rolling countryside that was partially visible through the trees. Pennsylvania might have stretched out to be ten times as big as Iowa if all of its mountains were somehow flattened, he pondered, letting his thoughts wander wherever they might in the awkward silence.

"Sorry," Annie gave Jim an apologetic look as she reached behind her neck, grabbed the back of her borrowed shirt's collar, and then pulled it up over her head, inadvertently pulling her white T-shirt up with it, baring her suntanned midriff and most of her back for a few seconds before it fell back into place when she finally got the shirt all of the way off. That brief glimpse at her bare back and stomach drew James' stare like a magnet and made him breathe a little deeper, and he didn't even know why. All he knew was that he'd liked seeing her that way.

She held the shirt out to Gary, meekly. "Here you go." Gary avoided eye contact with her. She finally turned to offer the shirt out to James, who was about to take it as their eyes met, but Gary suddenly reached in and snatched it.

James and Annie smiled and shrugged their shoulders at each other as they watched Gary preoccupied with changing from the red shirt to the blue one.

"You want to do something tomorrow?" She asked James as she combed her bangs with her fingers, crossing her pretty ice-blue eyes to focus on her hand.

"Yeah—," he answered a little too quickly. "I mean sure."

Smitten. That was the word he'd been looking for. He remembered his father using it once while reminiscing about the first time he'd met his mother. His father was smitten by his mother and now he was smitten by Annie.

"Okay," Annie said. Then she turned to Gary, who was still yanking his way into the blue shirt she had worn moments ago. He paused for a second to sniff the sleeve, apparently noting some smell, then continued pulling it on.

"Nice to have met you this summer, Gary," she offered politely.

"You bet," he responded with all the sincerity of a computer, without even looking up at her as he finished donning the shirt with a look of personal victory on his face.

Annie hesitated for another moment, as though she were considering whether or not to add something more, then apparently realized that her best course of action would be to just end the awkwardness. "See ya tomorrow," she said, flashing one last beautiful smile at James before turning and heading off.

James watched her fade to silhouette, backlit, melting into the still, humid air and the late afternoon sunlight. He wondered why he suddenly felt such a great sense of longing in his chest.

"Finally!" Gary proclaimed victoriously, snapping James back to reality as he straightened and smoothed his blue shirt with a smile beaming on his face.

James spied Gary's discarded burgundy shirt lying in a crumpled heap on the ground and picked it up. "It's late. We better go too."

"But I'm all ready to beam down again." Gary was actually serious.

James grabbed his knapsack off the ground by the base of a tree where he'd left it earlier. After shaking off the dirt, he stuffed the red shirt into it.

"Yeah, it's late," Gary added after a moment, knowing full well his best friend was upset. James turned and started to walk. Gary quickly fell into step behind him.

With a clear understanding that neither one of them were feeling at all happy about the prospect of being separated again, the boys started back down the hard-packed dirt road toward James' grandfather's house.

Roads weren't paved anymore. Automobiles didn't have wheels anymore—they hovered above the ground on a cushion of polarized anti-gravitons—or some such technology. By 2080 road paving had ceased entirely—the year mankind uninvented the wheel, James' father had once joked. Back in Iowa, James and Gary had often biked down what had once been known as Highway 218. It had had a sort of post-Apocalyptic feel to it, with grass and other vegetation sprouting up with abandon through the crumbling clumps of asphalt, alongside which could sometimes be found the occasional faded, rusted road sign tangled in vines and brush. There was even the giant rusted steel skeleton of an old billboard, its message long faded from its wooden planks. James had often climbed it so that he could sit and gaze out over the infinite flatness that was southeast Iowa, sometimes taking a book up there with him as well.

Unlike the flat roads in Iowa, in Gettysburg they turned and twisted, up and down and around, through the rolling hills and trees.

"Frazier's going to be really bummed when you come to visit. He was really glad when you left," Gary told him as they waded into a sprawling meadow's tall wild grass that had grown out of control and unchecked under the hot summer sun.

"Frazier makes me glad I left," James replied, more than half seriously.

"You never really told me what made you kick his ass like that."

"Nothing," James answered as he waved his way through a thin cloud of swarming gnats and watched dozens of grasshoppers spring into flight ahead of his and Gary's footsteps.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing," James repeated for clarity, watching his feet as he walked. "And he didn't kick my ass—I kicked his." Gary's silence prompted him to look and meet his friend's gaze. "What?"

"You got into a fight over nothing?"

"You and I got in a lot of fights over nothing," James reminded him, hoping to dismiss the subject. Gary clearly wasn't buying it, though, so James quietly though reluctantly relented, as though the truth had been some great secret that he'd had to guard, and told him, "Frazier called my dad a Klingon bastard. That's what we got into a fight over."

"You did?" Gary snorted, grinning and snickering before catching himself. He quickly assumed a more sympathetic tone and said, "I mean…what an asshole."

"Tell me about it," Jim intoned.

The boys continued trudging along in silence as millions of unseen cicadas continued singing their endless late summer chorus, rising to crescendo and then falling off again in perfect unison, as if they were following a conductor's lead.

"There's no cussing in Starfleet?" Gary mocked Annie's earlier statement with an overly shrill falsetto.

"You're just mad 'cause she got to wear the blue shirt," James accused. "She's nice."

"I don't care," Gary clarified his position.

"Oh, but something else—" Gary stopped in his tracks and turned to him.

"What?" James finally asked.

Gary gave James a hard shove, knocking him to the ground. "That." Then he spun and began to race off. "Race you home!" He yelled back as James scrambled to his feet and gave chase.

Their cross-country marathon cut right through the ocean of grass, across a road of old crumbling asphalt, and into the next field. Minutes later, drenched in sweat and panting heavily in the heavy, oppressive and humid air, the boys finally

slowed to jog and then walked side-by-side up the side of the tree-lined gravel road that led past the Kirk family farm.

"You cheated," James accused, panting heavily as they turned up his grandfather's long driveway.

James pushed open the wide gate in the old weathered wooden rail fence that surrounded the horse pasture and the rustic, faded red barn. According to his father, his Grandpa Ty had helped his own father and his uncles rebuild that barn when he was a kid. Beam-by-beam, plank-by-plank and nail-by-nail they replaced the two-century old frame to its original specs. Of course they'd used replicated lumber. Trees were not cut down anymore. Gone were the sawmills of yore. Now, with the latest quantum breakthrough that enabled transporter technology, basically anything, organic or inorganic, could not only be broken down on the atomic level and rematerialized elsewhere, but in fact it could be replicated at will. The same went for food. There were no slaughterhouses and hunger was a relic of the past as well. Even diseases could be "beamed out" of the body. Medical procedures, including organ surgery could be performed in stasis on a buffered patient without anesthetics. What an age in which to be alive.

"Granddad!" James called out as they headed into the barn. Then he noticed that the far left stall door was open and that Admiral's tack box had been taken down.

"In here," came his grandfather's clipped response as Blackie, his grandfather's three-year old Black Labrador, scampered out of that stall, stall number three, and hurried to greet the boys with his mouth hanging open and his tongue hanging off to one side in something between an overheated pant and a canine smile, his tail wagging vigorously back and forth.

"Hey, Blackie," James said, petting the dog's head and scratching behind his ears, much to the canine's delight.

Having performed his obligatory greeting duty, Blackie gave Gary a quick couple of sniffs and then trotted back into the stall ahead of them. James led Gary in the same direction, walking under the single row of rafter lights that his grandfather seemed never to use.

Sixty-five year old Tiberius "Ty" Kirk was a classically handsome man with sharply chiseled features like those of an old-time Hollywood movie star. He exuded an air of quiet confidence and life experience from a strapping frame as solid and as rough-hewn as the barn's load-bearing support beams. The boys found him tightening the thick leather belts on an antique U.S. Cavalry saddle that he'd apparently just strapped onto Admiral, his equally statuesque Thoroughbred.

"Hey, Granddad," James greeted his grandfather, who briefly flashed his crystal-blue eyes at him in response when a thin sliver of sunlight flashed across his face. "Sorry I'm late."

"Hey, Mister Kirk," Gary added respectfully as James raised his gaze to the horse.

James had admired the magnificent animal since the first time he'd laid eyes on him a few years ago, when his parents had brought the whole family east for a month-long visit. Nearly eighteen hands tall and rippling with firm, strong muscles and a defiant eye, Admiral had descended from a long line of Thoroughbred racehorses and was perhaps the most elegant mount—a term he'd learned at the Devon Horse Show—that he had ever seen. Not a single one of the spirited steed's lineage had actually been raced since 2095's ban on the sport by the United States.

Admiral's dark chestnut coat, broken only by splashes of pure white around his ankles and the single, almost perfectly symmetrical white stripe that ran from the top of his head, down the center of his face, and spread out to cover his snout, glistened under dust-filled beams of brilliant sunlight that streamed in through the narrow spaces between some of the wall slats, making him appear almost magical. The sport of competitive horse racing might have been gathering dust in history's attic since the worldwide ban in 2098, but centuries of careful breeding still survived in specimens like Admiral.

The name 'Admiral' seemed like an odd name for a horse, though, at least to James. He'd once asked his grandfather why he named him that, but then quickly dropped the subject forever when his grandfather only gazed at him for a few seconds without answering. Not that responses like that were all that unusual, coming

from him. Granddad wasn't much of a talker, except for whenever he decided to pass on some little tidbit of wisdom that he'd gained at some time or another during his life, and even that he did as economically as he could, in as few words as possible, without inviting any further equivocation—a new word that James had learned from his father a week ago. Everything his grandfather said and did was precise, lean, and measured, including those unblinking gazes that could make even the most prolific talker fall silent. Sam often referred to him, lovingly, of course, as 'the cowboy.' Their mother had once described him as 'the only man who could strut while sitting down,' but James had also once overheard her tell him that he was the father she didn't have. With Ty Kirk, what one saw was what one got, want it or not.

Along with Admiral and Abraham, the stallion that James rode from time to time, his grandfather boarded several other horses for Bill Keller, Annie's father, one of the locals who offered horseback trail tours of the Gettysburg battlefield. Granddad had known Bill forever it seemed. They'd met when both of them served as park rangers for the battlefield. Mister Keller had owned a horse farm at the time and had needed some additional boarding for his tour horses in the short-term. He'd eventually approached Ty Kirk and asked him if he could provide it. Ty had agreed, and short-term had become the last twenty years or more.

While James had always gotten along well with his father, things were different between his father and Grandpa Ty. Ever since James was old enough to perceive it, he'd known that there was some sort of longstanding tension between them. It wasn't ever loud or angry—at least not within earshot. He'd never heard them argue openly or even raise their voices at one another, but there was definitely something unresolved between them and he wanted to know what it was. A couple of summers ago he'd asked about it outright while standing almost exactly in the same spot where he was standing now, but Grandpa Ty just responded by asking him for the bridle, and the mystery went unsolved.

"I already saddled Abraham for you, James," his grandfather suddenly told him out of the blue—probably his way of scolding him for being a few minutes late for the preparation phase of their prearranged ride. Then his eyes shifted

briefly to Gary and he told him, “Better get up to the house and clean up. Win said said she’d give you a lift to the transporter station.”

“Okay then.” Gary turned to James with a sigh. “See you next summer.”

“And just me, yes, I know,” James agreed, sad that the time to say good-bye to his friend had come so quickly.

“So long,” Gary offered his hand and said in a serious tone, as though he were trying to impress Tiberius.

“So long,” James answered as he reached for Gary’s hand.

Gary snatched his hand away right before James grasped it “You’re so slow,” he chuckled.

“Whatever,” James replied, smirking as he withdrew his own hand.

Then Gary looked him straight in the eye. “You’re my best friend,” he told him, his tone filled with uncharacteristic sincerity as he offered his hand once more.

James studied Gary with suspicion, dropped his gaze to his outstretched hand, then finally relented and reached again. Gary yanked his hand away again. “You know the word gullible isn’t even in the dictionary?”

“Go to hell—and like you even know what a dictionary is.”

“There’s no cussing in Starfleet.” Gary said, mocking Annie once more.

Then they fell silent for a few moments. Finally Gary looked up at him.

“Okay then.”

“Right.”

And with that, Gary turned and was though the door and gone from sight.

CHAPTER 3

Gettysburg College

Tiny white particles of dust floated and glinted in the afternoon sunlight that shafted in through the windows of Gladfelter Hall and bathed George Kirk's face in a warm, bright amber-yellow glow. The slowly swirling dust reminded him of stars at warp.

He missed the life of a starfarer—missed exploring the far reaches of the final frontier—missed the adventure and the excitement of it all. But the warmth of Mother Earth's sun on his face and a view of the peaceful summertime Gettysburg College campus through his classroom's second story windows gave him an inner serenity that he'd not experienced in a long time.

He was home—well, not really home since the Iowa twister had all but erased his home from the Earth, but home in a much deeper sense of the word. This was where he'd grown up. This was where he'd learned to ride. This was where his father, Tiberius, still lived and where he and Winona had come to stay until they could come to a decision regarding where to live next...and this was where he'd finally indulged his lifelong wish to teach college. He'd served his years in Starfleet. He'd done his time exploring strange new worlds and seeking out new life and new civilizations. The time had come for him to put his family first. That was the place to begin again.

"Is it not better to disagree?" he read, turning his attention back to the dry, dog-eared paper pages of the old leather-bound book that he was holding open in his left hand. "Voices raised, thunder, disharmony? To accuse? Justified? Unjustified? Truth? Untruth?"

An attentive class of twenty-some odd eager young minds, some of them still in their teens, either followed along on their own holographic displays, or, particularly in the case of some of the more eager young female minds, fixed their eyes on him and did their best to absorb every word that flowed from his mouth and every gesture that he made as he spoke. No one, including George himself, noticed when the man in Starfleet black and gold quietly slipped into the back of the room and took a seat in an empty chair in the back row.

"Is it not better to argue for a thousand years than to kill for a day and eliminate a thousand generations?" he continued. "Anger must not be silent, for in that silence march the young and soon forever silent."

George glanced up at his students and finally noticed his old hell-bent-for-leather friend Varian Cain, in uniform, seated in the back of the room, just beyond a wide shaft of sunlight. Their eyes locked briefly, but then George quickly turned his attention back to his students.

"Starkly different than the romantic works of Tarbold's youth, right?" he asked rhetorically. "Like Twain, Tarbold's latter life was wrought with tragedy, and dark undertones began creeping into his work." He glanced at Cain again, saw the impatience on his face—whatever was on his mind, he hid it well beneath his furrowed eyebrows. "Okay, let's stop there. I'll be gone next week, so you'll have a substitute professor. Don't abuse him too much." He closed his book, signaling the class's end.

The students stood up to a cacophony of sliding chairs, shuffling footfalls, tablets beeping, and holographic displays powering down. They collected their belongings and made their way directly to the back of the classroom and out the door, most of them throwing Captain Cain a curious glance or two as they passed. The last one out, a particularly attractive young woman with long dark hair, bright green eyes, and a very short skirt, paused to look back over her shoulder and wave to George, flashed her lovely smile, and said, "See you later, Professor Kirk," then left him alone with Cain.

With eyebrows raised in approval and admiration, Cain watched the young lady leave, and then started walking toward George.

"Your uniform is looking a bit snug, my friend," George said as Cain approached him.

"You're one to talk," Cain returned.

George smiled and extended his hand, which his friend took with a smile of his own. "How are you, Cain?"

"I'm old, George," his friend replied.

They exchanged a couple more friendly jabs before George finally looked Cain in the eye, suddenly serious. "When do we leave?" he asked him, his tone both hopeful and regretful at the same time.

"Who says we're going anywhere?"

"Because I can think of no other reason in hell why you'd walk into my classroom, especially when we're reading Tarbold."

"Yeah. A special kind of torture," Cain agreed with a chuckle and a smirk.

"So?" George pressed. Cain only shrugged his shoulders in response. "We got time for supper? Win decided to indulge her old school cooking again." George followed up.

"Where'd you park, Professor?"

"Same place as always."

The old friends left the classroom and headed down a suddenly silent and deserted hallway. "Where the hell is everybody?" Cain asked as he glanced out through another window.

"It's summer," George reminded him as they started down the stairs. "I love teaching summer courses. Nobody's in a rush. The students really want to be there. They're not just fulfilling a requirement."

"Sounds nice—nice but boring," Cain said, sounding disinterested.

"How's the old rust bucket?" George asked, changing the subject abruptly.

"*Farragut*?"

"Know of any other old rust buckets?"

"It's always something. Fix one thing, two other things break," Cain answered matter-of-factly before turning to him with a half-smile. "Better than *Kelvin*, though." He furrowed his eyebrows. "God, I hated that ship."

"*Kelvin* wasn't that bad."

"For you maybe," Cain specified, laying a friendly hand on George's shoulder as they reached the bottom of the stairs and headed for the exit. "You got something to show for it."

"I almost had two things to show for it," George pointed out with a smile.

"Wouldn't have seemed right, Jimmy being born in space," Cain added. "I'm glad you made it back to Earth."

"He'll be excited to see you."

"That's because I'm more interesting than his old man," Cain explained, looking around as they walked. "You park way over here? Might as well just walk home."

"We are," George gave him a half-smile.

"We are what?"

"Walking home."

"You walked all the way here in this heat?" Cain gave him a smirk. "That better be one good dinner waiting for us."

"A walk will do you good," George told him, giving him a friendly pat on his mid-section as they paused briefly before they crossed West Lincoln Avenue onto College Avenue.

"Decide yet whether or not you're going to rebuild your place in Iowa?" Cain asked him, taking a turn at changing the subject.

George drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly before he answered. "We're still talking about it. Nothing definite. Now Jimmy's got it in his head to go away to

school on Tarsus Four, and with Sam off at the Academy, maybe we'll just sell the land in Iowa to that friend of Win's."

"Which friend? Not Frank."

"Why not Frank?"

"That horse's ass?"

George snickered. "How do you really feel?"

"That asshole tried to talk your wife into having a affair after you shipped out on *Farragut*."

"So? Nothing happened," George reminded him.

Cain sighed and shook his head. "I wish I had your understanding nature."

They walked on in silence for the next several minutes, crossed West Broadway and continued on College Avenue. "Good lord, George," Cain then said, finally breaking that silence as he wiped the sweat from his forehead. "How do you deal with this heat?"

George gazed at his friend. "What's on your mind?" he probed. "You're not the complaining sort."

Cain sighed once more, hesitated for a few moments, and then laid it all out, explaining, "I don't feel good about all this, George. Everything's happening too fast, not to mention all the cloak and dagger bullshit along with it." He noticed George eyeballing him intently, so added, "You don't think so too?"

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, I am a bit surprised at how fast things developed, too," George returned, smiling easily.

"Tell me about it," Cain agreed. "And it's not because I'm some sort of Klingon-hater, either—although I am. I like this Arkanon. But I'm a realist." George drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly as the road began to curve to the left. "What the hell kind of a name is that anyway?" Cain then asked him.

"Arkanon?"

"Mummas." Cain clarified.

George followed his friend's gaze up to an old age-worn road sign that read Mummas before the rest of the letters disappeared beneath a patch of rust.

"Mummasburg," George answered.

Cain wasn't really interested in the name of the damn road. Just how much further it went.

CHAPTER 4

Gettysburg Battlefield

"Every planet has a smell." That was just one of the many succinct snippets of wisdom that James remembered his grandfather offering up free of charge during one of his family's too few previous visits. Why Grandpa Ty had said that, he couldn't remember, and when his grandfather had ever even been to another planet, he had no idea—he'd never known him to travel very far—but he must have been to at least one other planet at some point in his life to be able to make such a statement. Otherwise, how would he know? At any rate, as the refrain of late summer cicadas rose and fell, he wondered if maybe every planet had its own noise as well. He would have loved to impress his grandfather by saying something equally profound, but the only planet he'd ever seen in his decade plus one year of life on Earth was Earth herself, and only Iowa and Pennsylvania at that. Well, he'd been to San Francisco once too, but he was too young at the time to remember it well now.

He reined Abraham along the well-worn trail a few yards behind his grandfather, who was, of course, riding Admiral. The last rays of early evening sunlight still angled through the trees almost horizontally, bathing them in a softly fading orange patchwork. Sunset wasn't far off—maybe another half hour at most.

He straightened his back—he'd been told never to slouch in the saddle—and looked down when heard the creaking of old leather as he adjusted his position. One of several old saddles that had been handed down from one generation of his family to the next, it had been broken in a long, long time ago and was comfortably soft and smoothed with age and wear, and had always been his favorite one of the lot.

The dirt trail emerged from the cover of the trees and then continued along the edge of the tree line, beside a spacious meadow leading up to where James' grandfather had told him an old automobile tour road had once run along the other side. The sun once again warmed the right side of his face as he continued following his grandfather. He gazed out across the sprawling field before him—so different from Iowa. Grassy fields sprawled between rolling hills for as far as the eye could see. Large clouds of gnats filled the oppressively humid summer air and swirled relentlessly around his head, landing on his face, flying into his eyes and his mouth, up his nose, and even into his ears where they made a high-pitched tinny whine.

As he wiped a damp shirtsleeve across his sweaty forehead, his gaze fell on an old artillery battery he'd seen before on the far side of the former tour road, facing away to look out over another great field that was sparsely dotted with old stone monuments. Those cannons were called Napoleons, he recalled his grandfather telling him a couple of summers back. Their barrels had originally been a bright bronze, but were faded now to a dull teal green due to oxidation. They were smooth-bored, unlike their iron brothers, which were painted black and could fire greater distances because they had a rifled barrel.

The last time he'd visited, Grandpa Ty had taken him to watch a battle reenactment during which men dressed up in Civil War soldiers' uniforms had actually fired a battery of cannon. It was strange to see only men in battle, but apparently historical accuracy was important enough to exclude women from the ranks of the reenactment. He'd even gotten one of them to explain the chemistry behind gunpowder, which was surprisingly simple, really—saltpeter, sulfur, and charcoal. It was that and the unexploded July 4th firework that ultimately ended with the loss of the section of fence by the house in Iowa. The irony being that neither the house nor the fence existed anymore.

He turned and gazed behind him at the reddening sun, watching as it slowly melted into the thick, ivory haze that lingered far beyond the battlefield over the western horizon. He tried to picture the hundreds of soldiers dressed in Union blue arrayed against hundreds more dressed in Confederate gray on the other side of the now serene field, firing their ancient rifles at one another, filling the air with

thick gray smoke and the smell of burning gunpowder as they charged forward into battles with names like "Devil's Den," "Reynolds Woods," and "The Wheatfield." His father had mistaken his interest in firearms as a general interest in the Civil War and began to educate them with frequent visits to the various battle monuments, to Sam's chagrin, who would rather be wiling away his summer tossing a football around with friends.

But James hadn't found his father's history lessons, as Sam had called them, uninteresting at all. Quite the opposite, in fact. He'd reveled in his father's stories from early on—for as long as he could remember, in fact—and his father had always been a first rate storyteller. In the beginning, James had to admit, even if only to himself, he'd only pretended to be interested in order to get to the rifles, guns and cannons. But as time passed and because his father was gone so much, he looked fondly back on those hours among the fields of Gettysburg with his father.

It was then that he'd first realized that he shared his father's passion for history.

Following his quick education in carpentry to repair the devastated fence, his father had introduced him to books—real, honest to goodness, old fashioned books—like the chemistry book but better. The very first book his father had made him read was *The Red Badge of Courage* by Steven Crane. "Words breathe on paper, not in a hologram," he'd told him one night. Holograms were fleeting and without history, but every book—the printing ink, the paper, the binding—had a history—lived forever.

When James finally began to choose his father's books over playing football with Sam and their friends, Sam told him, "I'll pray for you," half-jokingly, but with a heavy undertone of chagrin, and then he'd walk off, shaking his head in disappointment. How many times had James watched his older brother, football under his arm, walk away and leave him behind, sitting in their father's study, in his favorite chair, with his nose buried in one of those old books?

And what a collection of books it was, too. Most were classics, but a few years ago he'd found a particularly odd-looking one gathering dust high up on his father's bookshelves. It wasn't a classic like the more impressive literary giants that

filled most of the shelves, but rather was an obscure children's book entitled Fortunately. Its faded blue cover had borne an illustration of a man falling in a parachute. Page by page, Fortunately followed everything that happened to the man as he fell in the parachute, playing on the words "fortunately" and "unfortunately" while he faced one peril after another. It was a silly book.

It had been an unusual hobby in an age when books were fast becoming an anomaly in their twenty-third century world. But that, according to his father, made them even more special.

Anomaly. The word had sounded funny to him the first time he heard it, and it had taken some practice just to learn how to say it right because it was one of those words that if seen before heard, would be forever mispronounced. Now that he thought about it, though, the definition he'd read when his father made him look it up instead of just telling him what it meant seemed to apply to so much more in their world than just books. Anomaly—real books in the twenty-third century. Anomaly—a small family-owned farm with no livestock apart from Thoroughbred racehorses in a united world that hadn't known widespread hunger or horseracing in the almost two-hundred years since the Vulcans first landed and shook Zefram Cochrane's hand. Okay, maybe that was irony rather than an anomaly.

Even the Earth had once been considered an anomaly—a fluke of nature in space—a singularity where against all odds, life happened. Then the Vulcans landed and suddenly Earth was not so special, but rather was just another world among many full of new life forms and new civilizations.

A loud snort from Abraham pulled James back to the present. The suede colored dirt trail veered to the left to intersect with the former tour road which, unlike most of the old paved roads everywhere else, had been covered over with carefully manicured grass, leaving no evidence that there had ever been a road there at all. What remained was a grassy carpet, elegantly shaded by purposefully planted trees on both sides, creating a serene green tunnel that ran for as far as the eye could see in both directions. Granddad crossed seemingly without a second

thought to the other side, where the dirt trail seemed to reappear from beneath that grassy carpet and then lead into a large dense grove of trees.

As he followed his grandfather into the trees, James caught one last glimpse of those cannons. Over three long, hot days in July so long ago, thousands of men had lost their lives to those deadly weapons. That so few weapons could inflict so much carnage was...incredible, yet fascinating, and somehow, James' fascination with those cannons suddenly made him feel very guilty.

Surrounded by trees in every direction now, his thoughts shifted back to his several hundred years of being grounded, which in reality had only lasted through Christmas of that year—long enough to be sure. After reading *The Red Badge of Courage*, he'd suddenly realized that he'd become obsessed with books—reading anything and everything that he could find on his father's bookshelves, which were mostly filled with classics. Maybe that had been his father's intent all along. He still loved the idea of reading real words on real paper pages, bound into something permanent and lasting. He loved the smell of books. He loved that not only the words on the pages, but the books themselves had stories to tell. Recently, his father had suggested that he read a Charles Dickens story, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

All thoughts of books suddenly faded in one fell swoop when he recognized a familiar bend in the path ahead. This was where it had all begun. This was where he had met her. The best day of his life.

June 21st—just a couple of weeks after they'd pulled up their Iowan roots and moved to Gettysburg. Officially the first day of summer, he, Sam, and Grandpa Ty had been out riding and were on the way home when they ran into Annie and her father right there. Granddad, as it turned out, had known Mister Keller for years, so they'd paused to talk.

"This is my daughter, Antonia," he'd heard Annie's father introduce her. But his eyes had already locked with those brilliant aquamarine eyes of hers by that time. He'd barely even heard him, or her when she jumped in and said with that adorable rasp, "Everyone calls me Annie."

"Jim," he'd responded simply, almost without realizing it. "Nice to meet you." Or so he'd thought he'd said. Apparently, the only word that had actually made it

past his lips was, "Nice," and from that moment on, Sam had been thoroughly enjoying every opportunity he could find to refer to him as "Nice" instead of calling him by his real name. "That's not nice, Sam," their mother had once admonished him, but Sam had come right back with, "Actually it is." James had been so happy when Sam finally had to go back to the academy.

Sam's gleeful torture aside, after that first fateful meeting, James had jumped at every opportunity to go riding with his grandfather, hoping to run into Annie again. Unfortunately, though he hadn't known it at the time, Annie had gone off for a week to visit relatives. He hadn't seen her again until July 4th.

Annie had lived in Gettysburg all her life. Her grandfather had run a business that offered horseback tours of the Gettysburg National Battlefield. Her father had been a park ranger, but following her grandfather's unexpected death, he'd retired and taken over the business. That was how he and Granddad had met and gotten to know each other. Annie's mother was a professor at Gettysburg College. Annie was an only child. She'd told him that she often wished she had an older brother or sister, and James had assured her that that wasn't nearly as great as it might have seemed to someone without one.

James remembered every detail of that July 4th. Around six in the evening, as the relentless but slowly waning hot summer sun blazed down on the rolling hills of the Gettysburg countryside, he and Annie, rode their bicycles down Mummasburg Road just ahead of his father and mother, who were walking, with a protesting Sam, followed by grandpa Ty and Annie's father and mother. They had found a place on the Gettysburg College campus to watch the yearly outdoor concert. Then as a hot summer day melted from a rosy dusk into twilight, the fireworks spat, popped and boomed high overhead in a cobalt blue-black sky. It was one of the last patriotic vestiges of an "all American" event in a future four-hundred years removed from the founding of the United States. Not only had the world changed, but a galaxy. Still, in a little town, on a little planet in one corner of that galaxy, where one nation's heart and soul were tested for all time, time stood still for a boy and a girl.

After the fireworks, as everyone made their way back up the road home, Annie wanted to show him something. Pedaling ahead of him beneath a summer night's sky that refused to go black, but rather just became a deeper and deeper blue, and in the loud chatter and chirp of the cicadas and other night insects, they biked to the field of tall grass where she skidded to a halt. In the darkness ahead he could barely discern the gently downwardly sloping hillside he knew was there. He'd cut across it many times…in the daylight.

"Ready?" she asked in her raspy voice as she looked at him where he had stopped next to her on his bike.

"For what?"

"Follow me and do exactly what I do," she smiled. Then she looked forward and jammed her right foot onto her bike pedal and accelerated off into the tall, knee-high grass.

"Come on!"

"It's dark!" he yelled after her, but realizing she was either ignoring him or simply couldn't hear him, he jammed his foot on his pedal and rolled into the grass after her. He could feel the wispy soft whipping of the knee-high grass against his bare legs as he caught up and biked alongside her.

"What are we doing?" he called to her as his bike tire bounced and rattled on the uneven ground of the grassy field.

"Stars in the grass!" she yelled back.

"What?" He was mystified.

"Look!" she took one hand off her handlebar and pointed ahead down the gently sloping hillside. "Stars in the grass!"

He looked ahead into the darkness. There were thousands…maybe millions…of fireflies…hovering above the grass, above the entire sloping hillside as far as he could see. As they pedaled faster and faster, they passed like stars at warp speed. It was incredible!

Then he watched as Annie released her bike handlebars and threw her arms out wide to each side, letting the downward slope of the grassy hillside pull her faster and faster. He did the same. It was exhilarating. The soft summer breeze, the fireflies and the speed! He would never forget this moment…or her…as long as he lived.

The prickly sting of a mosquito biting into the back of his sweat-drenched neck pulled him back to the present. He slapped it, then had to squeeze his legs a little tighter against Abraham's sides as he picked it off and flicked it off his finger to steady himself when the horse spooked slightly at the sound of the slap. James then noticed that his grandfather had continued riding ahead and was about to vanish from sight just short of where the trail forked. Strange. In all the times they'd ridden together, his grandfather had never done that before—never left him behind. Perhaps he was finally feeling confident in his grandson's riding abilities.

"Let's go, Abraham," he said as he squeezed his legs again briefly and then clicked his tongue to coax his horse onward.

A light reddish-chestnut colored Bay with a dark mane and black lower legs and tail, Abraham was a younger but very solid horse, muscular and strong like Admiral, nearly as tall at seventeen hands, and with that same defiant eye. And, just like Admiral, he was one of the most beautiful horses James could remember ever having seen—not that he'd seen a lot of them. He was certainly one of the biggest horses he'd ever ridden, that was for sure. So big, in fact, that James sometimes still felt a little intimidated by him. He'd never admitted that to anyone, of course, especially not to Sam, but he wondered if Abraham could sense it.

As Abraham trotted forward, James thought about the name he'd ultimately chosen for the handsome, newly acquired mount that his grandfather had set aside for his exclusive use...in return for his agreeing to resume his riding lessons. Originally, he'd considered giving the young stallion a stronger name—something powerful, like 'Lightning' or 'Thunderbolt' or 'Thor'—something that symbolized the raw strength and free spirit that the healthy young steed clearly possessed. But his family had just moved to Gettysburg when his grandfather acquired the horse, so he'd decided instead to mark the occasion by choosing a name that seemed more

location appropriate. Gettysburg was where President Abraham Lincoln had given his famous address, so Abraham it was.

Strange how the universe worked, though. If he hadn't met Annie, he'd probably have never been as interested in horses or horseback riding as he was. Other than Granddad, Sam was the only serious equestrian in the family. He'd developed an interest in horses at a very young age and had been allowed to visit Granddad's farm every summer from the time he turned twelve years old. Granddad had encouraged that interest and had taught him to ride. Their father, of course, had grown up around horses, and while he was a capable equestrian, he hadn't continued pursuing any lasting interest once he'd headed off to Starfleet.

As Abraham closed the distance between James and his grandfather, James ran the fingers of his free hand over the antique U.S. Cavalry saddle's smooth leather. Of all the saddles his grandfather owned, it was the oldest, so he tended to use it on the new horses, where risk was the greatest. For the first and last time ever, he'd once lent it out to someone to use for a Civil War reenactment, and that person had returned it to him afterwards in less than satisfactory condition. Old and worn smooth as it was, it reminded James of one of those old worn books on his father's bookshelves.

James suddenly realized that his grandfather had completely disappeared from sight. All that stood before him now were the trail and the trees. He was alone and on his own, just him and Abraham. It was a great feeling—until he heard the sound of crunching leaves and breaking branches off to his left. He looked, and caught just a glimpse of a deer as it bolted off into the shadows.

The sudden noise spooked Abraham and he shot forward. James' heart leapt into his mouth as, fortunately, he managed to grab hold of the saddle horn, though just barely in time to stop himself from tumbling off backwards. It was all that he could do to hold on for dear life as the horse broke into a full-blown gallop, racing down the trail toward the fork.

Unfortunately, James had barely recovered his balance when he noticed that he was heading straight toward something that, for the briefest of moments, looked

like some kind of as yet unseen object beginning to materialize in a transporter beam, right there in mid-air above the trail.

Fortunately, it was only a cloud of gnats. No poor soul would be hopelessly scrambled by his face.

Unfortunately, it was a massively thick, swirling black cloud of gnats, swarming directly in his path like a translucent veil in the soft waning shafts of early evening sunlight that streamed through the trees beyond. James closed his eyes as tightly as he could and pressed his lips firmly together, but all a split-second too late, and as he plowed face-first right through that undulating cloud, he inhaled a whole host of the tiny insects, up his nose and into his throat. Coughing and choking, he sputtered his lips to spit them out while at the same time trying to concentrate on not bouncing out of the saddle as Abraham continued thundering toward the fork in the trail.

Fortunately, he regained his balance again, and his coughing broke into laughter when he realized how silly he must look.

Unfortunately, his left boot slipped from the stirrup.

Fortunately, he managed to jam it back in.

Unfortunately, in doing so he inadvertently jabbed Abraham's side with his heel. The horse took the unintended cue and veered sharply to the left at the last second, then tore down the left trail instead of following the usual route to the right, and by the time James finally recovered from his coughing and choking fit and got a good look at the trees racing past him, he quickly realized that he was completely lost. He had no idea where he was or where Abraham was taking him. He'd never been down this trail before, and what was worse, his grandfather was now some distance down the other path, probably halfway home by now and totally unaware that his grandson was racing away down the proverbial road less traveled.

There was no "fortunately" this time.

His heart leapt once more as he spotted a low-hanging and very solid looking tree branch stretched out across the trail and hurtling right toward him at face

level. He dove forward in the saddle and hugged Abraham's neck as tightly as he could, his head missing the branch by mere inches, as best he could tell, as he and Abraham rocketed as one beneath it.

With his cheek pressed firmly against Abraham's smooth short neck hair to the right of his mane, he cracked the slightest of smiles as he both listened to and felt the thunderous beat of the horse's hard-shoed hooves on the soft earth beneath them. His heart thumped so hard against his ribs that he wondered if it was trying to pound its way right through to the outside. He imagined that he could hear Abraham's heart pounding as well...or feel it...or both—that he had become one with his horse.

That was it! It suddenly dawned on him like the sun breaking through storm clouds. That was what his grandfather had been referring to all those months ago. That was what he'd meant when he told him to "be one with the horse" at the start of his very first lesson.

Unfortunately, right now they were also totally lost as one.

He sat up in the saddle again and drew back firmly on the reins to slow Abraham down. Then, when the horse finally stopped, he breathed a sigh of relief and dragged his sweat-soaked shirtsleeve across his eyes, hoping to wipe away whatever gnats remained, no doubt drowning in his sweat by now. Unfortunately, as he quickly discovered, scores of the tiny insects were now clinging to his sleeve, so all he'd managed to do was smash and roll a dozen or so of their tiny, surprisingly hard bodies into the sweat across his face.

He picked and spit a couple of them from between his front teeth and lips, drawing a firm bob of the head and a snort from Abraham. Then he looked around at the unfamiliar surroundings. He was in uncharted territory. The trail was gone and a seemingly endless forest crowded around him, surrounding him in an infinity of green and brown, their lush foliage deep and dense for as far as the eye could see, which wasn't really all that far. He knew that he couldn't be too deep in the woods. Abraham might have run fast, but he hadn't run long enough to go more than a few hundred meters at most, and there were still shafts of red-

gold sunlight angling in between the trees. But with that sunlight beginning to mute, his level of anxiety was beginning to grow.

Was this fear?

"Grandpa!" he called out, marveling at how the trees so quickly absorbed his voice and wondering how far its sound might have traveled first...or not. Was there even a chance that his grandfather might hear him? He reined Abraham slowly around in a circle. "Grandpa!" he called out again, louder this time, a hint of discordant anxiety having found its way into his voice.

"Right here, James," his grandfather's deep, calming blanket of a voice embraced him from behind.

James turned toward that voice, relieved, and was momentarily struck with awe at the sight of his grandfather sitting tall and confident atop Admiral, silhouetted by the last brilliant rays of the setting sun that still filtered in through the tree branches and fanned outward all around him, making him look for that one brief moment like some kind of god descending from the heavens on a winged pegasus.

Abraham let out a heavy snort and bobbed his head up and down several times as Admiral moved up beside him. They huddled close and brushed their noses together.

"You were daydreaming again," his grandfather accused him sternly without actually scolding him before he had a chance to say anything.

"No," James started, "there was this deer—"

"There are no surprises on a horse," his grandfather told him, cutting him off. "There is only lack of concentration."

"Yes, sir," he affirmed his grandfather.

And that was that. After a moment or two, his grandfather clicked his tongue, reined Admiral around, and started heading back toward the trail. James coaxed Abraham right into line behind him, where he fully intended to stay this time.

"There are no surprises." James pondered his grandfather's words. He had something new to add now to the growing list of truisms that came from the fountain of wisdom that was Grandpa Ty.

Moments later they rode through another particularly thick cloud of gnats that were swarming in what looked like the single last softly fading ray of sunlight. James saw that his grandfather took no notice of them. He just rode through them as if they weren't even there. Perhaps fountains of wisdom were immune. Everyone else, however, obviously was not, he concluded as he shooed them away from his face.

Riding with the deep cadence of the hooves in the dirt and the rising and falling chorus of cicadas, now interspersed with a few cricket arias, they soon left the trail and trotted out onto an open field more or less paralleling the old grass-covered touring road they'd crossed earlier. They were close to home now. He could see the dense wooded area that bordered Mummasburg Road, off of which Grandpa Ty lived. Those woods hadn't always been there. They had been planted en masse sometime in the mid-twenty-first century, and what had once been a vast field had, in the two-hundred or so years since then, completely forested over. Another part of the field nearer the house had been cultivated into several large apple orchards, from which the annual fall harvest provided apples both for eating and for processing locally into *Kirk's Apple Cider*, a product quite popular throughout the mid-Atlantic region, not to mention in the surrounding townships. It came in replicated vintage glass bottles with an oval gold and maroon label. The cider was opaque and dark golden-brown, as if hundreds of colorful fall leaves had been thrown into the press along with the apples used to make it.

James fixed his gaze on his grandfather's back. He found it interesting that whenever the two of them went riding together, his grandfather never said anything disapproving of his son. He found that to be a little odd, since most of the time they found themselves at odds with each other over just about everything. Sometimes, late at night, he could even hear them debating one thing or another. They never actually raised their voices at one another, but no one could deny the fact that they were two men inflexible, unwilling to see the other's point of view. When his family used to come and visit from Iowa, the two of them had always

found themselves in at least disagreement—usually just before it was time to go back home. Now that they'd actually moved to Gettysburg, disagreements had become more frequent.

Maybe that was the way it was with fathers and sons. He and his own father certainly got into it over something often enough.

He turned his attention to several of the old Civil War monuments scattered across the field, awash in the waning blood orange-colored setting sunlight. He'd seen them many times now, out riding, but because they always stayed on the road, he'd never gotten to look at them up close. "Who was the hero?" he asked.

"Of what?"

"The battle," James clarified.

"There were a lot of heroes," his grandfather told him. "That's why there are a lot of monuments."

"Right, but there must have been one hero—on the winning side, you know? The one who made a difference?"

"Heroes aren't always on the winning side, James."

"But dad's a hero, right?" James realized after he said it, he had accidentally cornered his grandfather. He hadn't meant to, but it was done. There was nothing left to do but wait for it.

"Heroes are relics of the past." His grandfather paused for just a moment, then asked, "Why is winning so important to you anyway?"

"I don't like to lose."

"Then I hope disappointment is something you can live with," his grandfather came right back, and with such a tone of certainty, it shut James down completely.

The two continued riding in silence down the path, with only the rhythmic thumping of their horses' hoofs in the dirt and the rising and falling chorus of the cicadas to listen to. James' mind wandered back to all the schoolyard fights he'd gotten into during his first few years of grade school. He'd started at least half of

them in retaliation for other kids teasing him—mainly about his middle name, Tiberius—his Granddad's name—and he'd won every single one of them. In fact, he liked the name Tiberius. He liked being named after his grandfather. He even liked it more after his father told him it was the name of one of ancient Rome's greatest emperors. He found out from Sam that his mother had pressed the issue of giving him Tiberius as a middle name. His father hadn't liked the idea but ultimately relented. Now, every first day of school when he stood up to introduce himself, he would always stand up tall and announce loudly, "My name is James Tiberius Kirk." Mostly out of pride, he secretly knew he was also baiting some poor, misguided alpha male into a fight after school.

James spotted the old railroad tracks off diagonally to his left as they started across Mummasburg Road and up the gravel drive. They passed the historic McLean Farm on the left and continued up toward the family home, once more under a nice shady grove of trees.

"I want to be like my father."

His grandfather reined Admiral to a stop and calmly dismounted. He turned and held his free hand out, palm up and waved his fingers. James handed his reins over to his grandfather—that hand was so large and leathery—and dismounted himself. It was a well practiced ritual that they repeated each time they arrived back home, though they usually dismounted much closer to the barn. He was about to start walking in that direction when his grandfather's voice stopped him. "Hold up."

Grandpa Ty shifted both passed Abraham's reins over to his left hand with Admiral's and then laid his right hand on James' shoulder as he knelt down in front of him, bringing his eyes to James' level. This was highly unusual behavior for his grandfather and more than a little disconcerting, but James took advantage of the moment and, perhaps for the first time ever, looked deeply into his grandfather's eyes, which pierced past his creased and cracked face into his own.

"Be your own hero, son, not someone else's," he said. The old man's deep tone seemed to engrave his words in the very air, as though it were a monument itself. "You hear me, James?"

James continued gazing into his grandfather's eyes and realized all over again what he had already known—that these eyes had seen more things in life than he could possibly hope to ever see. "Yes, sir," he finally responded in as deep a tone as he could muster. And then, for one fleeting moment while his grandfather's piercing gaze lingered on him, James caught a glimpse of something in those eyes that he couldn't remember ever having seen there before, and he smiled. Love. He'd just seen love in his grandfather's eyes. His grandfather loved him.

Seemingly satisfied that his message had been clear, his grandfather simply squeezed his shoulder once, stood up and started walking, leading both horses up the last stretch toward home.

CHAPTER 5

Kirk Orchards

In the soft evening shadows alongside the trees, as the woolen purple haze of a heavy, humid dusk absorbed the last warm glow of sunset, James stood beside his grandfather as he walked Abraham and Admiral into the barn through the large open doors, out of which an orange-yellow light spilled onto the ground. Once inside, in the common area outside the stalls, Ty began unfastening Admiral's bridle, then the saddle, which he hoisted from Admiral's back and set on a wooden sawhorse.

Without ceremony, Admiral trotted away from him and into his stall, leaving Abraham. Watching as grandfather scooped a mixture of oat pellets into all the horses' feed troughs, Jim suddenly realized his grandfather was letting him unsaddle Abraham all by himself for the first time. He immediately began to unfasten Abraham's bridle, then reached up under the horse's belly to unbuckle his saddle. That done, he reached up, grasped the saddle exactly the way his grandfather had taught him to, and pulled it toward him. It was a lot heavier than it looked, especially without any help. Its weight always took him by surprise and this time was no different. Thinking it through, he pushed close to Abraham and trapped the saddle between himself and the horse and let it slide slowly down and off the animal. Like Admiral, Abraham snorted and stepped away into his stall, leaving James burdened with the saddle. Arching his back to counter-balance the sudden dead weight, he managed to carry it over and heave it onto a second wooden sawhorse next to the other. Proud of his accomplishment, he looked sideways to see if his grandfather had seen, but he was busy with rustling in the tack cabinet.

"Hey, Granddad," he called out as he picked a gnat from his left nostril before it boldly went were many gnats had gone before, "when was the last time it snowed here?"

"Not in my lifetime," his grandfather answered as he leaned in to reshuffle some items inside the tack cabinet before firmly shutting the doors.

"Have you ever seen a twister?" he asked as his grandfather stepped back with a satisfied look on his face, from which he then wiped the sweat with his shirt-sleeve, landed his gaze on him.

"Go clean up for supper."

"Yes sir," James answered without question. He caught his shirttail on the wooden door on his way out, reached down and pulled it free carefully, so that he wouldn't tear it, and then double-timed it toward the house.

He spotted the greenish-yellow luminescent streak of the evening's first firefly hooking slowly upward in the shadows of the trees of the front porch of the house.

Echoing a classic late 19th-century Victorian theme, the home had actually been built around an historic stone farmhouse that dated back to the mid-1700s. Sometime in the twentieth century, whoever owned it at that time had built the rest around it. The original part had included a kitchen with an oversized stone and brick fireplace, big enough for James to actually walk into. That was the combined family room and living room now. The original exterior, including that huge fireplace, had been built out of irregularly shaped blue granite and fieldstone, which was stacked and held in place by mortar made of sand, lime, ash, and water.

James had only seen an actual fire in that fireplace once, a couple of years ago on a particularly cool evening while the family had been visiting over Christmas. His mother had convinced Grandpa Ty to haul in some wood from a fallen tree. But he imagined that in the old days, back when winter meant winter and came with a thick blanket of white snow on the ground, fires must have been lit in that old fireplace regularly. James had never seen real snow before. He'd only seen old pictures. Maybe, if they were lucky, it would finally snow this year for Christmas,

like in the Charles Dickens story his father read aloud every Christmas Eve right before bedtime.

Beneath the shadowy eaves of the porch a figure lurked in the darkness as someone stood up and walked from where they'd been sitting. Whoever it was had the shape of a grown man, but his features were obscured in the suspicious shadows of twilight. James squinted to try to get a clearer look at the figure, but he couldn't make out who it was. Hopefully it wasn't Sam.

"Hey Rudy!"

James jumped at the familiar low toned voice and immediately realized who it was. "Cain!" he shouted with a smile, bolting forward with excitement when the man stepped off the porch into the dim cobalt hue of the twilight sky. He took the steps in one leap and threw his arms around the man's waist as he slammed into him, eliciting a grunt.

"Okay there, Rudy. Take it easy," Cain said, laughing off James' overt display of affection as George came out of the house carrying a tall glass of lemonade in each hand, ice cubes clinking, his hands already dripping with condensation.

"I finally have to ask—what's with the Rudy thing?" George asked as he handed one of the glasses to Cain, who immediately upended it and emptied it completely.

"It's a secret, between me and Rudy here," Cain told him, making it sound like an official proclamation for James' benefit.

"Well, we're a family full of secrets," George commented indifferently as he caught a glimpse of his father's silhouette in the shaft of light spilling through the barn door. "What's one more."

"Hey there Ty!" Cain shouted as the elder Kirk briefly stepped outside to retrieve a bucket that had been sitting beside the barn door. Tiberius threw the briefest of glances his way, said nothing, and then headed back into the barn.

Cain shrugged and looked down at James, "You've grown since the last time I saw you."

"I've had two birthdays since you visited us in Iowa," James pointed out as if the fact should have been obvious.

"Two?" Cain exclaimed, pretending disappointment. "You mean I got back early? I was trying to make it five."

James laughed along.

"Well I'm here I guess…" Cain feigned resign. Might as well give you this then." Cain knelt down to James' eye level and raised his empty wet glass in his face. "Happy birthday." He handed the empty glass to James, who took it and studied it with an expression somewhere between confused and disappointed. Seeing little Jimmy's expression he smirked.

"Not that you silly birthday boy—" Then Cain reached behind his back, brought it around and held it in front of James' eyes, which crossed to focus on it. "This."

It was a pair of real Starfleet tactical binoculars.

"You remembered!" James exclaimed with delight as Cain took his glass back from him and in its place, put the binoculars in the boy's hand. James' eyes lit up as he spun around, raised them to his eyes, and gazed up through them at the night sky that was just barely beginning to reveal stars.

"If you're looking for Farragut, she won't be overhead for another two hours," Cain advised him.

Cain thrust his empty lemonade glass back into James' hand again. "Now, run inside and get me another. Your daddy here nearly killed me making me walk home."

James bolted for the front door.

"What do you say?" George called after his son in his most fatherly tone.

"Thanks Cain!" James yelled back through the screen door as it clattered shut.

Cain shook his head in disbelief. "My God, George, where do the years go?"

"I could answer that philosophically, if you don't mind me quoting some Tarbold."

"I'll take the sharp stick in the eye."

Less than half an hour later, after having spent the entire day out with some of the local friends he'd made back when he was a child and the family visited his grandfather every summer, George's older son, Sam, who'd only just arrived from Starfleet Academy that morning after being granted a twenty-four hour pass, showed up fashionably late for dinner to find everyone already in the dining room gathered around the small rectangular wooden dinner table. Full of unchecked and untested idealism, he was still wearing his burgundy cadet's uniform with that youthful pride that George vividly remembered from his own days as a cadet. Seemed like a lifetime ago.

Winona had laid out six beautiful and meticulously arranged Wedgwood place settings, complete with real cloth napkins. Tiberius sat in his usual chair at the head of the table while Cain sat at the opposite end—the place the Kirks had always set aside for single guests. George sat diagonal to his father's left, and an empty chair waited on his left for Winona to come in from the kitchen. George had offered to help her as he always did, but she'd declined, as she always did, knowing all too well that George was a complete invalid in the kitchen. They were a relic of another century, but it was the truth. Besides, she'd come to love cooking for everyone over the last few months in their temporary home. It complimented her other new passion, writing. Sam sat across the table to Cain's left in the only remaining empty chair, right next to James.

"Spend the day with your girlfriend?" he asked his little brother, wasting no time before vexing his little brother.

"Annie's not my girlfriend," James protested.

"I was talking about that idiot from Iowa," Sam shot back, drawing a warning rebuke from Winona.

"Sam."

"You're an idiot," James muttered low but loud enough for Sam to hear, and Sam would have come right back if it were not for his mother's arm in his face as she set bowls down in front of Cain and Sam first, and then in front of him. Crisp, cold iceberg lettuce, those plump little cherry tomatoes that always seemed to bring a smile to his face when they popped between his teeth, and cold, crunchy cucumbers, all topped off with shredded sharp cheddar cheese and homemade raspberry walnut dressing. James smiled. When his mother made a salad, she really made a salad.

"You hardly ever get to see your brother anymore. Why do you have to pick on him?" she said softly but firmly as she retreated to the other side of the table.

"'Cause I want him to grow up big and smart and tough, like me," Sam replied.

"Since when are you grown up?" Cain barked in a firm tone at Sam, who looked at Cain's frowning face. He was about to retort, but saw Cain raise his eyebrows and decided to pick up his fork instead, only then noticing Jim was grinning to himself.

"What are you laughing at, dumb-ass?" Sam asked him, frowning down at him.

"Your mother asked you to stop?" their grandfather broke in from the end of his table in his house. His tone made Cain's seem almost boyish in comparison.

Sam looked his direction, then quickly dropped his gaze to his salad bowl. "Sorry, Grandpa Ty."

"If you listened, you wouldn't have anything to be sorry about," his grandfather told him firmly.

Everyone attacked and finished their salads in relative silence after that, and then Winona brought out the real food out—a thick, juicy, tender faux-sirloin steak, lightly browned, with green peppers, sliced zucchini squash fried in egg batter, steaming home-baked bread, and of course corn on the cob, freshly picked from a small field Tiberius had set aside for her use near the barn. That broke the uncomfortable silence, drawing out compliments one after another, and helped ease everyone back into renewed conversation. Inevitably, the fact that George was

going off in service to the Federation once again soon came up, and it was a contentious one.

"Well if you ask me, I think those Klingon bastards are pulling a fast one," Sam stated as though he were the lone authority on the subject.

"Is that so?" Cain slapped Sam none too gently on the back of the shoulder, but still in a friendly manner, then looked across the table at George as he gently massaged that same shoulder, just as a beloved uncle would. "Hey, George. Your number one son here thinks he knows everything now that he's a big-time Starfleet cadet," he said. Then, after a moment, his smile faded and he glanced back at Sam. Letting his hand slide off of his shoulder, he continued in a more serious and somber tone, "But for once in his life, I think he's right."

"You bet I'm right," Sam proclaimed, riding a rare compliment from Cain.

"There's a first time for everything," Cain concluded, putting him right back in his place. Tiberius, meanwhile, had avoided making eye contact with Cain or George throughout the entire dinner, and as Cain's gaze passed over the elder Kirk on its way back to George, he noted that the old man was still doing it—still avoiding eye contact. Some things never changed. "I've never trusted any of them. Not that that's ever been any big secret, of course."

"Now I remember why we rarely invite you over for dinner, Cain," George teased with a knowing smile that fell just short of a warning, along with a brief sideward glance at his father.

"Joke all you want, George," Cain said as he pulled his arm back and rested his elbows on the table, suddenly very serious and bold, "but I just don't like the idea of you leading this peace delegation. Why can't they send someone else?"

"What President Alairus wants, President Alairus gets," George quipped.

"Add to that she's not even from Earth."

"It is called the *United* Federation of Planets," George offered helpfully.

"United my ass. Next thing they'll elect a Vulcan and that'll be the end of it all. Ty here agrees with me, don't you, Ty? Tell me I'm not right." Cain locked eyes with the old man, refusing to let him off the hook any further.

But Tiberius just locked eyes silently with Cain for a moment as he held his fork over his plate, then simply continued eating.

"Why him? Send someone else," Cain suddenly blurted out, picking up where he'd left off. "Some idiot diplomat. That's why they're there for God's sake." He glanced across the table at Winona. Regardless of the fact that her expression betrayed no feelings toward his statement one way or the other, he added, "No offense."

"I was a translator, Cain. I translated for idiot diplomats," Winona smiled.

"Dad'll be just fine," Sam offered his expert opinion between bites. Then he stabbed the next morsel with his fork and added, "Old Cain here'll make sure of that," Emphasizing the word 'old.' "Won't you, Cain?" Then he quickly shoved that next morsel into his mouth and started chewing vigorously as though it were twice the size as it had been.

"Old Cain's about to use his left boot to comb that unruly hair of yours, son."

James let a sharp snicker escape from his lips before he wisely covered his mouth.

Cain looked across to James and threw him a quick wink. Then he threw a glance in Tiberius' direction and said, perhaps with a little more emphasis than was necessary.

"Okay, Cain," Winona interjected, calmly but firmly, her glare sending all the warning necessary to her husband's old friend.

"Klingons don't trust diplomats," George chimed in.

"Who the hell does?" Cain shot right back. Then he looked at Winona again and shrugged.

"Kalor Arkanon trusts me," George continued, "and when you earn the trust of a Klingon, it's not something to be taken lightly."

"You know Kalor Arkanon?" James suddenly asked, gazing up at his father.

"We went to school together at Tarsus Academy," his father replied.

"Wow," James said with a grin. "What was he like?"

"For a Klingon, he had good manners at the dinner table," Ty stated firmly from the far end of the table, with little mystery regarding for whom his words had been meant.

"Yeah," Cain picked up, somehow calling attention to the fact that he was ignoring Ty, "and now all grown up, Mister Good-Manners just so happens to be the leader of the whole Klingon Empire." He gazed silently at Tiberius for a moment, then shifted his gaze right at James and added, over-dramatically, "Our mortal enemies." Then he winked.

"Don't say things like that, Cain," Winona insisted. "I don't want James to grow up hating Klingons."

"Why not, Mom?" Sam broke in and prodding his mother with false enthusiasm. "It's really easy. Come on, give it a try. You can do it."

Winona turned her scolding eyes onto her older son and smirked at his flippant manner.

"Whatever. I said my piece and now I'm going to shut the hell up," Cain relented with a sigh. He'd already known he probably wasn't going to get anywhere with that particular subject anyway, even before he started. Still, what he'd said had needed to be said.

"I didn't know Kalor Arkanon went to the Tarsus Academy," James said with lingering surprise as he looked at his father again.

"And I didn't know your middle name was Rudy," George responded quickly, looking at his young son with a bit of a half-grin on his face before giving his hair a good mussing. Granted, he'd been away on assignment for much of James' childhood, but he'd thought that as his father he would still know him much better than he apparently did. After years of frequent subspace messages and hours on end spent together whenever possible during his much too short visits home, he could

still never be quite sure what might spark the boy's interest. "I went there when your grandfather was stationed in the rim sector."

"I can't wait to go there."

"That'll be the day," Sam chuckled. "Walking into a tornado? Should have been a girl and named you Dorothy."

"I think little Jimmy here would make a great Starfleet officer," Cain interjected. "Better than you for sure." Cain smiled at Sam's momentary loss of words, then to punctuate the moment, reached with his fork and liberated a large piece of zucchini from Sam's plate before he could react.

Tiberius wiped his mouth and then dropped his napkin onto his plate. "Excuse me," he said rather gruffly as he stood up. He looked at Winona, "Great meal, Win, as always." He smiled at her briefly, then left the table and headed out through the living room.

"So, I guess everybody wants dessert but Sam?" Winona said, standing up as George's eyes followed his father.

"What?" Sam protested, raising his eyebrows.

George shifted his gaze to Cain, who simply shrugged. Then he got up and followed his father out of the room. "Dad," he called as he stepped out onto the porch and pulled the inside door closed behind him. He saw his father walking off into the darkness toward the barn. For as long as he could remember, his father had always had exceptional hearing, but now he kept walking as though he hadn't heard a thing, which didn't surprise George in the least. If he wanted to talk to his father, he was going to have to go to him. That, too, was nothing new.

He closed the screen door gently, not wanting to let it slam, then moved forward to the top of the steps and gazed after his father for a few moments, wondering if it would be worth the effort—wondering if he really wanted to bother trying. It was probably a lost cause...a waste of breath. Then again, despite everything, the man was his father. He had to try. He stepped off the porch and headed down the path.

In the clearing between the dark treetops to the west, the massive black thunderheads of an approaching storm revealed themselves as lightning coursed through them. It reminded George of the distant mountains he'd seen out west, except that these mountains illuminated themselves from within with unceasing flashes of white lightning. The thunder was so distant and muffled and almost inaudible over the night-time chorus of insects that he knew the storm was still some distance off. Perhaps it would bypass them completely. That would be fine by him. His romantic notions of weather had been swept away by the same twister that had obliterated his home. Then again, the heavy night air was so stuffy and supersaturated that the cooler temperatures a good squall would likely bring would be nice.

And perhaps some cooler air would make for some cooler heads.

By the time he reached the gate, his father had already gone inside the barn. He approached the open door slowly, quietly, and then hesitated once more, standing in the fire-like glow that poured out from inside onto the ground. Then, finally, he walked in, his steps deliberate.

"Dad?" he called out as he walked inside. He heard, then saw Blackie stand up in his place in front of Abraham's stall and knew right away that that was where his father had gone.

Tail up and wagging, Blackie scampered forward and met him halfway and coaxed a head pat out of him, then paced him the rest of the way to the stall, panting against the oppressive heat that had been trapped in the barn. Then he returned to his customary spot in front of the stall and lay down.

George found his father brushing Abraham's coat gently and methodically—a familiar sight that he'd seen so many times throughout his childhood.

"Sorry about all that," George offered.

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to her," his father told him.

George glanced over at Blackie for a brief moment, then decided to shift to a new topic. "I've been wanting to tell you for some time now how much I appreciate you putting us up while we figure things out," he offered.

"What did you think I'd do?" Ty all but muttered rhetorically.

"I know Win enjoys spending time here."

"She deserves better." Tiberius paused in mid-stroke for a moment as though he were going to continue, then resumed his brushing without further word.

George felt a twinge of guilt as he realized exactly to what his father was referring, then also realized that if there ever was a perfect time to discuss what was on his mind, this was it.

"Something on your mind?" Ty asked him without looking at him as he bent down to continue brushing, out of view behind Admiral. George side-stepped to bring him back into view.

"You know how bad things have gotten," he told his father. "We're this close to the whole thing spiraling out of control, and if it does, war is inevitable. If there's anything I can do to help..."

"Talking to the wrong person," his father advised him.

"Win and I have talked about it for your information," George countered. "She understands completely."

"Does she?"

George could see that the conversation was going nowhere. "Anyway, I just wanted to say thanks." When his father offered nothing in return, he turned to leave.

"You said you were done with Starfleet," his father reminded him before he'd gone two steps, his words seemingly landing right on his back.

George turned around to find that his father was still fully engaged with his brushing. "I was," he confirmed. "But then Arkanon contacted me—?"

"You don't owe him anything. Cain is right. Send someone else."

"There is no-one else," George almost whispered, his voice heavy with resignation.

"I should have never let you go to that damn school," his father told him, sounding regretful for the first time that George could remember. His father never regretted anything. At least, he'd never let on that he did.

"Tarsus?" George asked him after a moment, raining his eyebrows.

"Damn waste of time if you ask me."

"I didn't want to go there. You made me."

George watched as his father stood back up into view again and then turned to the tack cabinet without a word. Then he stopped, uncharacteristically and turned to him, locking gazes with him.

"What has Starfleet ever done for you? Tell me. They took your brother, and they might as well have taken your mother." But then he left it. "I don't even know why you're talking to me about it. You've made up your mind."

"You brought it up," George reminded him, raising his voice a little bit.

"Sorry I did."

Fathers and sons had been arguing like this since time began, George reminded himself. Down through the ages, sons had been disappointing their fathers and vice-versa, and the world went on.

George suddenly felt guilty for thinking that way. His father's life hadn't been an easy one. He'd lost his wife and his son—George's older brother, John—both events that George himself had been around for.

"Say what you mean and mean what you say." How many times throughout his childhood had he heard that from this man? And yet, after that—"after that" being their conversational shorthand reference to the unthinkable, the losses of his brother and his mother—after that, his father had stopped living by his own mantra. Well, half of it anyway. He'd always meant what he said, but he'd said very little. Their most meaningful conversations had always been arguments.

George looked at the shadow his father cast on the wooden slats of the stall, moving in concert with him as he brushed. The metaphor was clearly evident. Tiberius Kirk was a shadow of the man he had once been—before that. After

that, the change in him had been as clear as the difference between night and day. Not that he'd been a bad father by any means. Not at all. But the happy, content man whom he'd known before that had become the quiet, often introverted and often intractable man who brushed his horse methodically in front of him now. Could he blame him? How would he react if he suddenly lost Win and Sam? With only James left to him, would he shut out the rest of the world as well?

And yet, despite the unexplainable rift between them, this man had taken both Sam and Jimmy under his wing—especially young Jimmy. Often, George would look at the two of them when they weren't aware that he was around—grandfather and grandson—and he'd see in his father such a gentle guiding hand at work in Jimmy's life. Sometimes, in more self-indulgent moments, he'd imagine that he was looking back in time—catching a glimpse of some sort of alternate timeline in which he was Jimmy, and both his brother and his mother were still alive.

But, sadly, they were moments that could not last.

"Something else you need?" His father's voice and fixed gaze snapped him back from his wandering thoughts.

"No," George replied, dropping his tone along with any further desire to continue their conversation. Then, after another moment, he turned and started to walk out again.

"For God's sake, George, you have one son still growing up," his father's voice echoed from behind his back.

He stopped again—turned back around again—this time to find his father glaring at him, having side-stepped into the open.

"That's right, I do," George stipulated, "but unlike you, I've somehow been able to get out from under this dark shadow that you and I have been under for the last fifteen years."

"I don't want to talk about it," his father told him.

George looked at his father, who simply turned and ignored him completely, vigorously picking up where he'd left off moments before, brushing Admiral's coat.

"Since losing John and mom, you just shut down," George found himself saying before he knew it. "Dad, you're not the only one who lost them."

"I said, I don't want to talk about it."

"That's the problem. We've never talked about it...ever. You and I—we just packed all of it up in a box and stuck it in some sort of mental attic, and then went on with our lives."

"Sorry life has been so rough for you."

Tiberius Kirk had never been one to be easily angered, but he also had a special way of shutting down a conversation...stopping it dead in its tracks.

"Me too, dad. I'm sorry it's been rough for both of us." George felt the words leaving his mouth but wasn't quite sure from where they were coming. "Unlike you, though, I got past it—I moved forward and went on with my life. You? You just shut down, and in the process you've alienated every friend you ever had." He felt another twinge of guilt in his gut, but he'd had to say it.

"Friendship is overrated," his father replied, stepping back beside Abraham to continue brushing. "Live long enough and you'll find that out yourself. In the end, everyone disappoints you."

"I know you blame yourself for John joining Starfleet, and his getting killed—but it's not fair that you then heaped all that guilt on me for joining Starfleet. Now that Sam's following in my footsteps, you probably blame me too—and Jimmy too, God forbid he does."

Ty offered nothing but silence and brushstrokes.

"What's this about Dad? Is it about me going on this thing? It's a summit, not a commission. I'm not on the front line. The President and Kalor asked for my help, and damn it, if it me helping means we avoid all-out war, I'm more than happy to

do it. You want war to break out? You want Sam in harm's way? You want Sam to end up like John? You want Winona to go through what Mom did?"

"Don't," Ty snapped, raising his hand and the brush to point at him.

"So, that's it. This is about Mom—"

"God damn it, I said don't," Ty raised his voice and stepped out from beside Abraham.

"I know we haven't seen eye-to-eye since the day I left for Starfleet, but I knew there was something else." George takes a moment, then his tone softens. "Dad, Win is nothing like Mom. Mom was sick. God bless her, she dealt with her pain the only way she knew how—"

Tiberius' firm open hand impacted the side of George's head before he ever saw it coming. Blackie started barking incessantly as George shook his head and blinked his eyes until his vision finally cleared.

"I told you to leave your mother out of this!"

"So…you do feel after all." George looked at his father standing there, and for the first time in his life, his father looked smaller…older…vulnerable. "I miss them both, too, Dad. So much. Sometimes I even think I've spent my entire life trying to make a difference in their memory. If that's how I dealt with it, well, so be it. But you? You just shut down."

Both just stood there for a couple moments in the sounds of a summer's night.

"Goodbye Dad."

George turned and headed out of the barn. He didn't see his father's brilliant blue eyes glistening with tears.

CHAPTER 6

The Old Rustbucket

In the darkness of a Gettysburg summer's night, James stepped out onto the front porch with his new binoculars clutched firmly in hand. Lightning flashed somewhere off in the distance behind the treetops and a cool breeze suddenly kicked up and wafted gently past him, tickling his forehead with his bangs, drawing his wandering mind back to the real world. He waved his empty hand back and forth in front of his face, shooing away a moth that had wandered down from the swarm circling the holographic light above his head. During dinner Cain had mentioned that the *Farragut* would be up there somewhere, low enough to be seen through the binoculars. If he wanted to see it, he was going to have to hurry if he wanted to beat the rain.

He stepped up and leaned forward on the railing beside the stairs and gazed out across the yard, where dozens of fireflies were winking and drifting slowly in a hundred random directions in the darkness. He raised the binoculars to his eyes and scanned the night sky before his gaze came to rest on the brilliantly gleaming full moon, which danced wildly in and out of view. He switched the image stabilization on, and the moon settled down into the most breathtaking view he had ever seen. It was so huge and appeared so close—as though he could actually reach out and scoop up a handful of moon dust.

But as incredible as the moon was, he'd come out to look for *Farragut*. He glanced at the glowing blue digits on the in-view display—they changed rapidly with even the slightest movement. Cain had told him exactly where the starship was going to be, but he couldn't seem to find it.

He heard the door creak open behind him and heard his mother, Cain, and Sam talking as they came outside, ice clinking in their glasses.

"I can't find it," he complained, hopefully loud enough for Cain to hear him over the noise the others were making.

"That's because you're looking through the wrong end, dumb-ass," Sam's teasing voice came back instead.

"Sam!" his mother scolded his brother sharply.

James lowered the binoculars and looked back at his mother with a smile. "It's okay, Mom," he said. "It makes him feel better about himself."

Cain, who'd sat in the chair closest to James, leaned forward and reached for the binoculars. "Here," he said, making a couple of adjustments to the their settings while James looked on. Then he pointed up in a particular direction into the sky without even looking and said, "Try it now."

James gazed through the binoculars again. "I still can't see it," he said after a moment.

Cain reached out again and gently nudged the binoculars ever so slightly to the left. "Keep looking," he said. "You'll find it. You just have to look hard."

Sam snickered and smirked at them as he picked up his half-empty glass of iced tea and stood up. "Refill, Mom?" he asked.

"I'm okay," she answered.

"I'll take one," Cain answered immediately afterward, holding his empty glass out to Sam.

"I wasn't talking to you," Sam told him with a smirk.

"I wasn't talking to you, sir," Cain corrected the young cadet.

"Sir was implied," Sam grinned.

"Yeah? Well, I'm going to imply my size twelve shoe up the crack of your ass," Cain shot back with a heavy tone of authority.

Cain held his glass out, which Sam took and headed inside. "And more ice!" he added.

"I see it!" James suddenly blurted out with excitement, drawing his mother's and Cain's attention away from their conversation.

Backlit against the brilliant blue-white glow of the gigantic full Moon magnified by the binoculars, James watched the unmistakable silhouette of a Constitution class starship silently cross the Sea of Tranquility.

"Wow," James Tiberius Kirk whispered in awe.

"That's your daddy's ship," Cain told him with a smile.

"Was his ship," George's voice corrected him as he emerged from the darkness of the front yard and stepped up onto the porch. "That old rust bucket's your problem now."

"Maybe one day she'll be your old rust bucket, Jimmy," Cain said, winking at James when he glanced back at them.

George frowned at his friend. "Don't be putting ideas into his head," he intoned. "Jimmy can be anything he wants to be when he grows up."

Jimmy noticed that a firefly had landed on his hand. He gazed on it and after a moment the firefly spread its wings and with a couple luminescent winks, was once again off into the darkness.

"Where'd you wander off to?" Cain asked as George took a seat beside him and watched James gazing through his binoculars.

Before George thought to answer, a short but strong gust of cool wind billowed through the still, humid air, bringing with it that telltale moist ozone aroma of impending rain.

"Smells like rain," George said.

"You think it'll finally snow this winter?" James asked, his eyes wide with anticipation as he turned back to look at them.

"I wish it'd snow right now," Cain complained. "How do you deal with this heat and humidity—not to mention the bugs—" Cain punctuated 'bugs' with a swipe across his face with his free hand.

"I've never seen snow," James frowned.

Cain put a hand on James' shoulder. "I tell you what. Next time I through, I'll bring you back an actual snowball from Delta Vega."

"Won't it melt?" James asked.

"I could beam that snowball up into that fancy new transporter thing, store it in the pattern buffer, and anytime I want, I can beam it out and it'll be as cold as the day I beamed it up."

"Wow," James imagined.

"Fascinating." Sam was obviously not really interested, having overheard Cain as he came out through the door, back onto the porch.

"So, I guess I'll see you in the morning," George said as he stood up.

"Trying to get rid of me already?" Cain asked as he stood up as well.

"As quickly as possible." George gave Cain a quick pat on the back, then stepped down off the porch and started down the path.

"Guess I'm heading out too," Sam announced as he walked over to his mother. "Bye, Mom."

"You stay safe," she said as she gave him a kiss on the cheek, barely able to hug him before he let go and was down the stairs after his father as Cain watched, noting the look of concern on Winona's face as she gazed into the darkness after her husband and older son.

"I'll bring him back safe," he told her in his most reassuring tone—a tone that obviously didn't impress her in the least, as her eyes shifted and met his with a very serious glare.

"You do that," she said almost curtly.

Cain drew her into a quick hug and gave her a peck on the cheek, then turned to see that James had become lost in his own world again, gazing through the binoculars up at the night sky, oblivious to everything going on around him.

"So long, Rudy."

CHAPTER 7

Pegasus

The monochromatic shadows of a leafy tree branch stroked the side of the house next to the porch where George stood alone, his shoulder against but not leaning on the post at the top of the steps with his arms folded across his chest. His gaze was fixed on the brilliant, nearly full moon, which seemed to rest on the front of clouds pushing in from the west. The full-on chorus of night-dwelling insects filled the air, which was still heavy and moist with humidity.

He would leave this place in less than twelve hours. The earlier confrontation with his father in the barn occupied his thoughts. In all the years of his childhood, his father had never struck him—not once. Of course, George had never dared venture into the subject of his mother's suicide so frankly before, either. He'd had no idea that his father still harbored such strong feelings after so many years. But then again, why wouldn't he? His own feelings were still quite strong, after all.

He regretted what he'd said—well how he'd said it, to be more precise. He'd meant every word, but those words had come out unfiltered. What if this was the last time he would see him? His father was still a robust and healthy man, but robust healthy men could be here today and gone the next. Every time he left his father's home, the lead-up to his departure was contentious, over one issue or another. He was moving slower.

Literally shaking his head as he brought his gaze back down from the moon, he silently berated himself for entertaining such self-indulgent thoughts. Just as he had been every time before, his father would be here when he got back.

Another distant rumble of thunder registered in his consciousness some seconds after it passed. He glanced out beyond the tree line, but saw only darkness. The storm had turned away and was moving off. If only the weather control network had done the same in Iowa.

"What happened to our storm?" Winona's voice interrupted his thoughts as she stepped out onto the porch and walked up behind him.

"Dud, I guess," he answered as he put an arm around her and pulled her close.

"Fine by me," she said, and she meant it. "A little rain would have been nice though."

George glanced sidelong at his wife as she gazed out from the porch, her face bathed in moon-glow. He knew that she had as much on her mind as he did. With both he and Sam heading off again, not to mention having lost their home in Iowa, it suddenly dawned on him that perhaps he'd been a little too wrapped up in his own affairs. She liked it here and unlike him, got along swimmingly with his father. But all the same, the uncertainty of where the future lay had to be on her mind.

He watched her as the moonlight gently illuminated her face. "I know things have been rough for you lately," he said.

"Thanks for making it easier," she replied with a smile, her tone filled with her own special kind of sarcasm that he absolutely adored. "How long has it been since you've seen this Arkanon, anyway?" she asked after a few long moments of silence.

"Since I was...James' age." The reality that he hadn't stood face-to-face with his childhood friend for decades suddenly hit him. Sure, he'd seen him and talked to him over the subspace, but that was it.

"Well, here's hoping two grade school buddies can avert a war."

"Jimmy's been bugging me about going there again," gazing at the moon, she almost seemed to be talking to it.

"Going where?"

"Tarsus Academy," she clarified. "Not sure how I feel about him off at some boarding school. Everybody wants to leave me," she said, her smile fading. "You ever wonder if we did the right thing? Leaving Starfleet?"

"We did our bit. I'm content to look up at stars."

"Says the one heading off to answer the call of duty one last time."

George drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "We have to try. War's a luxury nobody can afford anymore." He smiled once more and held his hand softly to her cheek. "I'll be fine," he added, hoping to reassure her, at least a little bit. "Rigel Seven. You've been there. It's practically as far away from the Klingons as it is from us. Besides, you know Cain. First sign of trouble and he's guns-a-blazing."

"I don't want guns-a-blazing," she shot back. "I want warp engines-a-blazing, and I want you out of there and back here."

"Remember what I used to say to you when we were on the *Kelvin* and I'd be heading off on some mission?" he asked her.

"I love you?"

George smiled. "And they say women are the ones with good memory? I used to tell you I'd be back before Pegasus galloped toward the moon. Remember?"

She smiled and rolled her eyes. "Of course, I remember," she lovingly chided him. "You were born in the wrong century, George Kirk." Winona had never been a pushover for sentimentality, or if she had, she'd never let it show.

George chuckled. "I was quite the romantic young fool, wasn't I?"

"You were a piece of work," she corrected him in a tone that betrayed obvious affection despite its edge. "Still are," she punctuated sharply. And then she turned and gazed up at the moon for a few moments—perhaps looking for Pegasus. "You're a good man, George," she declared after a few silent moments. "Delusions of grandeur, but you're a good man. I guess that's why I love you so much."

George grinned. Winona always knew exactly what to say and how to say it. All those years spent translating messages between worlds had given her that. She'd heard just about every kind of conversation there was to hear in just about every

language there was to hear it in—Vulcan, Andorian, Tellar, Klingon, even Romulan, and countless others. She knew the subtleties of words and what they really meant and how to use them right, and how not to misuse them the way so many members of modern society tended to without even realizing it. As he recalled, that similarity between the two of them—they both loved words. It was what had attracted them to one another in the first place. He wished she would take up writing again. He'd always enjoyed reading her work back at the academy. Even then she was talking about wanting one day to write and tell stories.

He grinned, recalling their first date, which it really hadn't been because he had actually asked her roommate out—a helm officer trainee from the Martian Colonies whose name he couldn't remember. He'd shown up early, and while he waited for what's-her-name to finish getting ready, he'd talked to Winona. The rest was history—including her roommate.

He felt the texture of her hair on his neck as Winona rested her head on his shoulder while they both gazed up at the sky, slowly being occluded by the front of thunderheads, rim lit by moonlight.

"Where is he? Pegasus." Winona remarked after a few moments.

"Must be somewhere behind those clouds." George answered.

"No way to know which way's he headed."

Above them, oblivious to all the uncertainties of adult life, beyond the porch roof where they couldn't see, the moon shadowy fingers of tree limbs scratched at the side of the house next to an open bedroom window, through which young James gazed up through his binoculars at the stars.

CHAPTER 8

Off to Peace

Already panting from the slowly but steadily rising early morning heat and humidity, Blackie had lain down in the shade beside the porch steps, but he jumped to his feet, tail wagging, as soon as he heard James come out of the house and walk across the porch. He trotted up to him as he stepped down into the yard, then stood beside his right leg and looked up at him, ready to launch, his big dark brown eyes anxious with anticipation.

"Ready, boy?" James asked him with exaggerated excitement as he alternately rotated and squeezed the bright yellow-green tennis ball in his hand where Blackie could see it.

His grandfather's loyal companion woofed in response. Still young and full of spunk, he was always more than ready to play. He'd happily play all day if James wanted him to.

Just as his father had taught him, James wound up, stepped out with his left foot, and threw his arm forward with a grunt…but he didn't release the ball. Instead he hid it behind his back. Blackie shot forward like a starship jumping to warp, kicking up a cloud of dust behind him, but then stopped just as quickly, turned around, and looked back at James, eyes wide and ears perked, as if to ask him what he was waiting for.

"No fooling you, huh, boy?" James smiled, then wound up once more, stepped out with his left foot, and threw his arm forward with all his might, sending the ball high into the air and far across the yard. Blackie locked eyes onto his target and tore off after it.

"I'm leaving, Jimmy," James heard his father say behind him.

James turned around and saw something he hadn't expected to ever see again—his father back in Starfleet black and gold. He glanced at the three solid bands of gold braid around the cuffs of his sleeves where there had only been two bands flanking dashes before, and then at the logo on his chest—no longer the black star on gold oval that he'd worn when he commanded the Farragut, but a more circular and intricately patterned symbol, like some kind of flower or maybe a starburst. What the symbol represented he had no idea, but he did know that it was Starfleet Command's new logo. Then he noticed a large hard-bound book in his hand.

"Got something for you." His father held it out so he could take it as Winona walked out and waited at the top of the porch steps and watched them.

"*A Tale of Two Cities*," James read from the cover of the heavy book as he took it and turned it over. This was the book he'd mentioned. He turned it slightly and the cover fell open to the first chapter.

"It was the best of times…it was the worst of times," Jimmy read the first sentence. He furrowed his eyebrows. "What does it mean?"

"Read it and find out. Anyway, come on. Give your old man a hug." George took the book from him and set it on the bottom step of the porch, knelt down, and pulled James into an embrace.

"Going to miss you," James told his father.

"You too, Dad."

"I promise I'll read that by the time you get back," James told his father.

"Take your time. It's important you understand it," his father replied. George and Win caught each others' gaze for a moment, and then George loosed his hold on James and locked eyes with him. "Help out your mother," he said. Then, with a pat on his son's shoulders, he stood up and pulled his communicator off of his belt.

Instinctively, James backed off a couple steps, reached down and picked the large book off the porch step, and held it close as his father flipped open his communicator and said, "Kirk to *Enterprise*. Ready to beam up."

In the corner of his eye, George caught sight of his father in silhouette, riding up beside the barn, where he paused. The golden gleaming sunbeams of late summer morning parted the trees and spread out behind him. Seconds later, the air around him began to hum and there was the smell of ozone in the air.

James watched raptly as his father's uniform seemed to swim in sparkles, which soon absorbed his entire body in a swirling glowing quantum brilliance. Then he glistened, burst into a million points of exploding light, and then faded away as the humming trailed off.

CHAPTER 9

The Tree

He could feel the curvature of the the tree trunk on his back as he sat in the majestic oak tree, straddling one of the thicker nearly horizontal branches. He'd discovered the tree within a week of their moving to Gettysburg. It reminded him of the long lost Red Oak in Iowa, but larger. The bottom corner of the hard bound book cover dug sharply into his thigh, and truthfully he was a little distracted, but he'd promised his father he would finish reading it by the time he returned. Judging by the thickness of the book, he had been overly optimistic.

Certainly, he could have brought along a much simpler device to read or even listen to the book, rather than the actual book itself, but books were special. "Books were survivors," his father had said once when he had sat him down and told him the story of why they were. After the so-called "great e-pocalypse" of 2053, paper, glue, and binding had saved Earth's civilization as man had known it at the time. Cain had once joked that perhaps they would save civilization again when it ran out of firewood, but had been quickly shut down when James' father brought up the Nazis and book burning. That was the one and only time that James could remember ever seeing his father become truly and openly irritated with Cain and his often irreverent sense of humor that reminded him of Gary's, only much darker.

He loved his new tree. His grandfather had told him it was a White Oak, which was probably why it had caught his attention in the first place. It was taller and sturdier than that lonely old Red Oak back in Iowa. He'd first noticed it when he was walking home from the apple orchard one day and had decided to climb it then and there. Somewhere half-way up, he'd found the perfect branch where he

could sit and lean back against the trunk in perfect balance and comfort. It was like it had been custom designed by Mother Nature for him to one day be.

As he turned the page, he felt a tickle under his left nostril and instinctively thumbed at whatever annoying bug had decided to boldly go there. The quick motion shook the book and it teetered on his leg. He quickly gripped it firmly again, then settled down and continued reading the same paragraph that he suddenly realized he'd been reading over and over. The persistent bug returned beneath his nose and he threw his hand to his face and scratched, then rubbed where he scratched, then continued reading again. A gentle breeze swept through the treetops, rustling the lush green leaves all around him—always a welcome respite of cool on an otherwise hot and steamy day—another hot and steamy day—as it blew across his sweaty face.

A few moments later the tickle returned yet again. This time he looked as he brushed it away, and found himself eye-to-eye with a single leaf attached to the end of a long twig. He looked up a little higher and discovered that the other end of the twig was connected to someone's hand. He looked even higher and found Annie perched on the branch above him, leaning over him with a grin on her face. The hand was hers.

"Look at you," she accused playfully.

"Look at *you*," James chided with a half-smile.

"Whatcha reading?" Her wide-eyed aquamarine gaze left him speechless for a moment, then he lifted the book to show her the cover and answered, "*A Tale of Two Cities*. I promised my dad I'd finish reading it by the time he got back. It's kind of long." Then he noticed a smaller book draped over a thin branch beside her and asked, "What about you?"

"Tarbold," she answered with a sigh. "Found it on your porch."

"Yeah. Belongs to my dad."

"So which one are you on?" she teased as a long wayward strand of golden blonde hair dropped over her crystal-blue left eye, which she promptly blew away with a puff from her upturned lips.

"Which what?" he asked.

"Which city?"

"Oh—right," he got her joke. "It's about the French Revolution."

Weeks ago when he'd first brought her here, it had become a rendezvous point. Either he was here or she was here and the other would show up. It wasn't just his tree anymore. It was theirs. At first she hadn't gotten the whole book reading thing and would just listen to music or play holographic chess. Following a browsing of his father's books—actually a mix of both his father's and grandfather's books that had merged shortly after the move from Iowa—she had begun to show interest and had become willing to explore his tree-top reading ritual. Her patience had been limited though. While he was willing to let time run away from him as he read, she'd usually lost interest well short of an hour.

"I want to go to New York and see Les Mis," she said, crossing her gorgeous aquamarine eyes on the leafy twig close to her face as she rolled it back and forth in her index finger and thumb.

"Miss what?" he asked.

"Les Miserables," she clarified, dropping the twig and looking at him. "Broadway show—about the French Revolution—like your book only way better. I've always wanted to see it in person." Then she locked her laser gaze on his. "Maybe you can take me to see it one day."

"Maybe," he smiled.

"You miss Iowa?" she asked.

"Not as much as I thought I would, I guess," he answered honestly. And he realized just how true it was as soon as he said it. He really didn't miss Iowa—not like he had the first week or so after they moved. Before he'd met her.

"I've never seen a tornado," she told him. Then her interest in the twig waned and she turned her eyes up toward one of the few puffy white clouds that were drifting slowly across the otherwise clear blue sky. "I thought weather control took care of tornados and stuff like that."

"Not that one," James said, somewhat sardonically.

She turned sideways to gaze down on him. "You must have been scared to death."

"No, not really," he replied very matter-of-factly before he realized how it probably sounded.

"Whatever," she snickered, unimpressed.

"No," he quickly continued, looking up at her, intending to qualify his answer. The last thing he wanted was for her to think that he was just another one of those kids who always tried to impress his friends by acting tough. "It's hard to explain, but I wasn't scared. I've really never been afraid of anything—ever. I know that sounds strange. It's like...I really don't know how." James found himself absorbed by his sudden self-analysis and he wondered if she'd ever felt the same way, or if he was the only one. So he asked, "You know what I mean?"

"Nope," she answered instantly, grinning unabatedly.

"Whatever," he fired back, with a dismissive smile. But how at ease Annie made him feel...like she belonged in his life...like she had always been there...like she always would be.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he did read too much. He closed the book and dropped it into his knapsack, hanging over the small branch beside him.

"Gary doesn't like me very much, huh?"

"What makes you think that?" he asked her.

"I don't know."

"Don't let it bother you. He's just, well...very Gary."

"How'd you guys become friends, anyway?"

"School. We were sitting outside the principal's office." A sheepish grin swept across James' face as those memories suddenly played back in his mind—visions much funnier now than they had ever seemed before.

"What were you doing at the principal's office?" Annie inquired, intrigued.

"Which time?" Kirk decided to risk.

"Whatever."

"We got into a fight," he clarified.

"You became friends after you got into a fight?"

"It happens," he said sheepishly.

"Why were you fighting?"

"I don't know." James knew that sounded strange—maybe not as strange as not being able to be afraid, but almost. "I don't remember," he added to qualify his answer, but that didn't make it sound any better, the way he'd hoped it would. "I'm always getting into fights," he then continued as his thoughts began to drift back over some of the more heated issues over which he and Gary had come to blows. "It wasn't my fault."

Apparently, that was good enough for Annie, because she seemed suddenly to become lost in her own thoughts. "I don't want summer to be over," she said after a few silent moments had passed between them. "I don't want to go back to school."

"What's school like here?" James asked her.

"Probably the same."

"I'm trying to get my dad to send me to this private school on Tarsus Four next year."

"Where's that?" Annie asked, genuinely curious.

"I don't know exactly," James answered, realizing it for the first time. Then he smiled and added, "Second star to the left?"

"To the right," she corrected him. *Peter Pan* was her favorite book of all time. "Your dad would send you away to school?" She thought it over for a moment, then pointed out, "My dad sure wouldn't do that to me."

"No, I want to go there," he explained. "Everybody wants to. Even the Vulcans are sending their kids there."

"I've never met a Vulcan."

"Me either."

Another moment passed in silence as Annie gazed down at him. Then, as if compelled by a sudden impulse, she climbed down to the branch he was sitting on and moved toward him. He watched her entire move, wondering what had motivated it. She finally situated herself directly in front of him, facing him. Then she leaned in and kissed him, very quickly and very practically, but squarely on the lips. And then she leaned back and studied him intently, furrowing her sun-brushed eyebrows at him.

"You waiting for me to say something?" were the only words that James could seem to muster, and they stumbled from his mouth.

She unfurrowed her eyebrows. "I really don't get what the big deal is all about."

"I hope this branch is strong enough," James remarked. Where the heck did that come from, he yelled silently at himself in thought. The girl you're falling in love with just kissed you for the first time and all you can say is 'I hope this branch is strong enough?'

"I hope so, too," Annie agreed neutrally.

Inside, James was experiencing a vertigo of emotions. Maybe this was fear?

"Fortunately…" he found a word and it would have to do, and mustering all his mental resources and focusing them in on one last-ditch desperate attempt to save what was left of the moment, "…you don't weigh that much." He followed up his words with a sheepishly clumsy smile, hoping that she'd find it charming the way his mother had always found his father's smiles to be—at least, that was what she said—and that his humor would make her forget that boneheaded comment he'd made.

She picked right up on it, and then she smiled. "Yes, but unfortunately," she countered playfully, "there are two of us, and this is just one branch." She raised her eyebrows expectantly and waited for his response.

"Fortunately, this is a strong branch," he came back quickly and easily, emphasizing his words to match hers.

"But—unfortunately—we don't know how strong," she countered quickly.

"Fortunately, it's holding," he came back just as quickly, inwardly impressed with his own quick wit.

"Un-fortunately, we don't know for how long," she came back with easily, leaving him scrambling mentally. Fortunately, she changed the subject. "Wanna try it again?" she asked.

"Try what?" He went blank, only to find her leaning forward, puckering her lips. "Oh—" He'd barely gotten the words out before she pressed her lips to his once more.

This time, he kissed back.

Time stood still, except for the ever so slight rustle of leaves, the gentle touch of a soft warm breeze, and the smell of her golden hair. After a few moments—exactly how long, he had no idea—he leaned back and gazed at her, her eyes still closed as though she were in a trance. Then she opened them, revealing those aquamarine blue eyes that reminded him of glacial melt water. And then she smiled and raised her eyebrows.

"We're going to have to work on that if you're going to be my Marius," she said matter-of-factly.

CHAPTER 10

Enterprise

With his trademark cardigan sweater hanging loose and open over his command gold shirt, forty-eight year old Captain Robert April of the Federation starship *Enterprise* stepped out of the elevator onto the circular command bridge and gazed at the star shower streaking past the forward viewport—an optical illusion, but a beautiful one.

"Captain's on the bridge," a confident, firm voice announced to his side. It was his exec, Chris Pike, a lean, dark-haired officer who had been seated in the command chair, who had stood up to vacate the chair upon seeing April arrive.

After a few habitual twists of the bottom button of his sweater between his index finger and thumb, April walked down and took his place in the center seat. He briefly noticed the cushion back where he was about to put his hand, worn a little smoother than the rest from where he'd many times gripped it unconsciously, steadying himself where he'd stand a few moments before sitting as he glanced around the various stations to see who was on duty.

He simply nodded to Pike, who immediately left to walk over to the comms station where he consulted with the comms officer.

There was a bit of a heaviness in April's heart as he looked at the familiar faces. Enterprise was showing its age at nearly twenty years and soon would be going under a refit.

Starfleet had nixed building an entirely new starship for the immediate future and opted simply to replace the warp engine nacelles, which were more streamlined and power efficient. Truth be told, many of Starfleet's ships of the line were

showing their age just like *Enterprise*, and several would all but certainly be on their way to being mothballed by day's end because the decades-long undeclared war between the Klingons and the Federation was about to end far below on the planet surface.

But that's not what weighed on him. He was stepping down as master and commander after this final mission—trading center seat for a seat behind a desk at Starfleet Command. He was actually already supposed to be there but the surprise breakthrough that led to this unprecedented summit had put his transfer to Fleet Command on temporary hold. Starfleet wanted its most experienced at its collective helm for this most important event. He was uncertain how he felt about it, but no matter how one weighed it, he'd had a good run.

"Approaching de-warp, Rigel Seven, Captain," the helmsman dutifully reported, breaking his reflection.

"De-warp protocol, Lieutenant," April ordered calmly. "Standard orbit."

"De-warping in three seconds, two, one," the helmsman counted down.

"Polarize the dome," April added as he looked up at the domed ceiling, which transformed from its standard opaque metallic gray to transparent, via the realignment of the aluminum atoms, offering a sweeping overhead view of the stars, which stopped streaking as the ship de-warped. The beautiful amethyst planet known to the Federation as Rigel VII—a moon really—along with its gigantic mother world, grew quickly to fill the front viewport, then rose high above and across the now transparent bridge dome. The view was spectacular and reminded April of the Adler Planetarium in Chicago he'd visited as a young boy on a school trip.

Rigel VII—or Gastillion as it was now called by the Klingons, was the very spark that had set off the war. It was about the size of Venus and had a marbled purple tint due to its oceans reflecting the much larger gas giant planet that had captured it two millennia before. Once sharing nearly the same orbital path as the Klingon home world, Kronos, Gastillion had mysteriously gone missing two-thousand years ago—disappeared around the other side of the sun. The ancient Klingons of Kronos would look up at Gastillion when its faster orbiting brother

world passed by for several weeks each solar year. Klingon culture had many myths about its why it had vanished into the cosmos, but true blame lay with the gas giant that now clutched it close, which had such a sluggish orbit around the sun, it would be out of view for five thousand years at a time. Once it had snatched Gastillion, both were hidden behind the sun until the Klingons of Kronos entered their space age.

About fifty years prior to that, Gastillion had been "discovered" by pioneers from Earth, who wanted to name it 'New Antarctica' because its rocky shorelines' so strongly resembled the primordial coastlines of the newly ice-free continent at the bottom of Earth. The only indigenous population on Gastillion were a hundred or so primitive warlike clans known as the Kaylar, who seemed never to have left their dark ages. The Kaylar lived among the thousands of stone ruins of walled cities, castles and battlements that cluttered the ancient planet. Ongoing hostility immediately flared up between the invaders and the invaded that had parallels to Europe's discovery and colonization of the Americas.

Then, when the scrolls of Kahless were discovered among the ruins, the Klingons suddenly realized their long lost mother world had been rediscovered. Civilization on Gastillion was much older, by perhaps a thousand years, than that on Kronos. The ancient scrolls called their world Gastillion, and suddenly the backwards world became a point of major contention between Klingon and human.

More intriguing was how both Kronos and Gastillion had evolved independently, with two genetically similar races, suggesting that the Klingons of Kronos and the Kaylar of Gasillion shared a common ancestor. But how did two ancient ancestors travel between these planets with no spacefaring technology? Were they seeded by ancient space travelers perhaps? In fact, the bigger mystery had been vexing scientists had been how so many humanoid-like beings had ended up clustered on so many worlds along a wide swath of the galaxy. Humans and Klingons, in fact, shared a few strands of ancient DNA, as did many other worlds, which when discovered, turned on its head the entire theory of evolution back on Earth. Who were these mysterious ancient astronauts who left no evidence of their presence? Were we related to them? Did they leave long lost colonies? It was a mystery shrouded in stardust and fire.

A scattered cluster of small floating specks came into view on the main viewport, some drifting against the backdrop of the planet, others against the black veil of space. As the seconds ticked by and those specs grew larger, their marked differences in shape began to become apparent. They were starships.

April felt a sudden chill ascend the length of his spine and pulled his sweater a little tighter around him, then folded his arms across his broad chest to hold it in place. In all his years as a shipmaster, he'd never felt so apprehensive about a mission before. Not afraid, but apprehensive. Perhaps suspicious was a better word. There was the potential for a hundred things to go wrong here. Risk went with the job, certainly, but parking his ship in orbit in the middle of what promised to be a hornet's nest of Klingon battlecruisers was something else entirely—he didn't believe for one second that they intended to abide by their agreement to send only three ships—and he didn't like it…not one damn bit. Besides, just around the other side of the sun was Kronos, and in just a matter of moments they could dispatch backup.

"Tactical up front," April directed.

The helmsman polarized the front viewport and switched it to full screen mode. Following this, a detailed graphical overlay projected over the live action, consisting of a swarm of brightly glowing radicals of various colors and geometric shapes, and a small translucent bright red dome on the surface of the planet—the security deflector field protecting the summit venue. Each of the six force-field emitter stations, located equidistantly some twelve miles outside of and surrounding the summit venue, were all being operated by a small staff composed of equal numbers of Klingon, Vulcan, and various other Federation personnel whom April had jokingly coined 'the watchers' during one meeting. He remembered someone else then jokingly asking, "But who's watching the watchers?" While not powerful enough to withstand a full-on bombardment, the field was more than strong enough to block transporter signals and detect errant spacecraft or transmissions. All attending the summit would have to travel back and forth the old fashioned way. Security came with compromises, but in this instance especially, that inconvenience was mandatory. April's thoughts wandered to his special guest several decks below his feet.

"Crowded out there." Pike's voice sounded uneasy, as he stepped back over to April's side.

April glanced at his X.O. for a brief moment, then turned his gaze back to the ships on the screen. He liked Pike. He was a sharp, no-nonsense, practical sort who would likely rise to command a starship of his own in the not too distant future. But Pike's assessment was right-on, as usual. Extreme caution was the understatement of the day.

"T.O. give me eyes-on the Klingon fleet," he ordered.

From a station to his right, the tactical officer reached out and tapped a single control on his console. The viewer first displayed an image identical to the one they'd just been seeing live through the window, but then that image wavered as though they were suddenly viewing it through the rippling surface of some unseen ocean. It then stabilized once more, coalescing into something that April had hoped he would never see again in his lifetime. Three entire formations of the Klingon Empire's newest D-6-class battlecruisers, nine warships in all, had taken up positions in orbit where any two of them could easily cover the third in combat, should things not go well on the surface below. Standard Klingon battle tactics. Viewed head-on, the stingray-like silhouette of a D-6 invoked nothing if not sheer intimidation, especially with that gaping maw of a torpedo launcher mounted in its bow, staring straight out at its potential targets like a giant, unblinking red eye.

"Is it just me or can't the Klingons count?" he vocalized his observation.

"Yes, sir," Pike replied in support.

"Form up with our fleet," April ordered. "Show me."

"Aye, sir," came the response from the T.O.

The image on the window-turned-viewport shifted up and to the right as the helmsman complied with the order, and the flotilla of Federation starships came into view. Keeping station prominently among them were a pair of the original Constitution-class heavy cruisers—the *Farragut*, commanded by Captain Varian Cain, apparently having just arrived as well as she was still maneuvering into posi-

tion, and the *Republic* under Captain William "Hard-Nose" Bridger. April had known they'd be there, but seeing them in place nonetheless gave him some small sense of relief. Especially the *Republic*, he mused with a telling grin of admiration. She was the oldest of the class, and as soon as the post-summit ceremonies were concluded, her honorable service as a ship of the line was due to end. She would be withdrawn from the active fleet and be designated an academy training vessel, and rumor had it that old Hard-Nose intended to go with her. It was fitting that their final real-world mission together was to be one of peace. Positioned more or less between the heavy cruisers, Captain Richard Robau's *Kelvin* and the Pioneer-class *Archer* were present as well, as were three of the newer and smaller single-nacelled scouts.

April grinned once more as his eyes fell on the *Kelvin*. The grand old lady of Starfleet, with her extra wide diameter saucer and her roughly fifteen-hundred foot overall length, she was the only ship of her class to ever have been built, and with more than three decades of service logged so far—thirty-plus years of wear and tear—she wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. She was truly unique, as was her gristly captain.

April and Rich Robau, who was nine years his elder, had met at the academy—Robau an assistant instructor when April was a plebe—and had become good friends by the time April graduated. They'd made a bet that very day, in fact, each of them claiming that he would not only be the first of the two of them to command a starship, but would command more of them throughout his career than the other as well. Robau had won that bet initially, rising to command the *Kelvin* while April still served as a first officer, but now April was sitting in his third center seat, while after sixteen years as captain, Robau was still sitting in his first. Of course, the older man wasn't showing any more signs of slowing down than his ship was, so April suspected that it was still going to be a few years before they could sit down together and settle that bet.

April's gaze shifted and came to rest on the *Archer*, which began to fill the screen. The first Federation starship to incorporate a saucer-shaped primary hull instead of a sphere since the days of the old Daedalus-class cruisers, the *Archer* bore a striking resemblance to the original warp-5 *Enterprise*, whose first captain

she had been named for. Starfleet Command's intent had been to christen her the fleet's flagship, in honor of Captain Jonathan Archer—rather, Admiral Jonathan Archer by that time—but Archer, who hadn't wanted a ship named after him in the first place, had refused the additional honor...adamantly. The Federation founding ceremony's most memorable speaker had felt the honor of being christened fleet flagship should go to proven ship of the line. So, despite her age and despite the fact that she was no longer officially a ship of the line, that honor had gone straight to his former ship, the *Enterprise*, and her original NX registry number had been changed to NCC-01. She'd been the flagship ever since, in tradition if not in practice, but after about forty-five years, the time had come to transfer that flag, and with it her prestigious name.

"Tactical off," April ordered.

"Tach off, eye," the T.O. confirmed. The image faded and the viewport cleared, giving April and his officers a live view of *Enterprise's* sister ships.

"Officer of the Deck, prepare to render honors," April calmly ordered without taking his eyes off of those ships.

"Honors, aye," Commander Christopher Pike acknowledged from somewhere off to one side. He flipped a switch on a console, sending an all too familiar automated high-pitched Boson's whistle call echoing through the ship.

CHAPTER 11

Farragut

Sitting center-seat on *Farragut*, Captain Varian Cain sat back and sighed, shaking his head in frustration as he gazed out through the main viewport. Not that he felt at all surprised by what he saw out there. Klingons. He already didn't trust them, and now they'd given him yet another reason to keep feeling that way. "They said three ships," he complained aloud to no one in particular. Of course, Starfleet had sent more than three ships, too, but that was different. They'd had to fly all over the Federation and pick up the various representatives who were expected to attend. Three ships would never have gotten the job done in time. Besides, Starfleet hadn't stated or agreed to any limit. The Klingons had.

Recently commissioned Ensign Jonathan Marston, Cain's new personal yeoman, tugged downward on his shirt and then smoothed it out as he nervously approached Cain's side, handed him a tablet and stylus, and then offered in jest as he read over the ship's status report, "Klingon math."

"Did I ask you something?" Cain snapped at him as he gazed sidelong at the young man. He liked him, even if he did look like he was about fifteen years old. He had a good academic record from the academy and had proven over the last few days since coming aboard to be fairly easy to get along with, but he seemed to have an innate tendency to speak out of turn, and that tendency was beginning to wear on Cain's nerves.

He looked straight into the younger man's hazel-green eyes. "Mister Marston," he began in as patient a tone as he could manage, considering that he was already feeling on edge over the excessive Klingon presence in the area. An expression of dread found its way to the ensign's face and his gaze fell to the arm of Cain's chair,

and Cain suddenly felt as though he were scolding a high school kid. He wished that he could just let it go, but it was too late for that. He'd already spoken up and the ensign was waiting, no doubt reluctantly, for the other boot to drop, so he had to finish. "Please don't feel obliged to remark or answer anything I say unless I say it to you specifically."

"Yes, sir," the ensign responded sheepishly, almost whispering.

"Sir, *Kelvin* is hailing us," the comms officer reported.

"Up front," Cain ordered as he signed the report and handed the tablet back to Marston, wondering how anyone so emotionally venerable as he seemed to be could possibly have survived four intense years at the academy, let alone performed so well there.

"I hate to say 'I told you so,'" Robau boisterously complained with a familiar intensity glistening in his dark eyes as the right quarter of the window polarized and his image appeared over the darkness. Obviously, the same thing was on everybody's mind. At fifty-seven, the Cuban-born Pakistani-American didn't look a day older than he had the last time Cain saw him, except perhaps for the fact his head looked less shaved and more naturally bald. His gold command shirt actually made his skin look darker in contrast and therefore younger than the old blue-gray one had.

"Rich. I guess for the Klingons, six is the new three," Cain mirrored his old friend's annoyance as his executive officer, Commander Charles Garrovick, approached him and stood by his side, mercifully shielding Ensign Marston's quiet retreat.

"Maybe they consider the chancellor's flagship to be a diplomatic vessel?" Garrovick suggested, trying to be helpful, though judging from his tone of voice that possibility was something that he didn't even believe himself.

"Maybe they just can't count," Cain fumed. Then he turned his attention back to Robau and, pointing his thumb at Garrovick, said with a slight grin, "You can have this one back anytime. He's been a regular pain in the ass."

Robau finally smiled. "Why do you think I recommended he be transferred to you in the first place?" he joked in return. Neither, of course, felt that way about Garrovick, who was well liked by both. Down on the planet surface everything was peace, love, hope, and rose-colored glasses, but up there in orbit, with all those enemy vessels in such close proximity to one another, it was pucker time.

"Where's George?" Robau asked, suddenly serious again. "I thought he'd be with you."

"No," Cain replied, emphasizing the word with plenty of sarcasm. "Old George gets to ride on Bobby April's brand new flagship with the President."

That annoyed Cain almost as much as the presence of all those extra Klingon battlecruisers did, but it wasn't about ego, as someone who didn't know them very well might have suspected. He just really wanted his best friend close by, where he could watch his back the way he always had in the past. Robau would understand that, unlike Starfleet Command, who had unfortunately not understood at all...or had not cared. Protocol had interfered with his getting what he wanted, as usual, dictating that George arrive on *Enterprise*. As a result, Cain had been forced to make...special arrangements...that even George himself didn't know about, because there was simply no way in hell that he was going to leave his best friend hanging out there alone.

"Well, better let you muster my cadets," Robau pointed out, chuckling, apparently feeling the need to engage in a little more of that verbal jousting before he signed off.

"Oh, and hey, I think you're leaking something there, Rich," Cain responded with one last jab before signing off.

Robau smiled to let him know that he wasn't offended, though Cain knew that he never would have let anyone else get away with it...except maybe for George. Then his image flickered and dissolved, and that portion of the view outside returned.

"Miss your old ship?" Garrovick asked, taking full advantage of the all too rare opportunity to rib his skipper about his old duty assignment aboard *Kelvin*.

"*Kelvin's* not a ship. It's old plumbing in a pretty dress," Cain came back.

"*Enterprise* reporting on station, Captain," the comms officer reported. "She's on approach from thirty degrees off the port bow, z-plus-five."

"Good," Cain responded, turning and looking back at the youngest lieutenant onboard. As he did so, one of the lead Klingon battlecruisers fired a disruptor salvo high across *Enterprise's* saucer. "I'm anxious to get started so we can get this thing over and go..."

"The Klingons are firing on *Enterprise*!" *Farragut's* young tactical officer shouted as his fingers started dancing frantically over his console.

Cain faced front in time to see the last of the bright green disruptor bolts sail harmlessly well above and across *Enterprise's* saucer. He knew immediately what was going on. His tactical officer did not. He was reaching for the control that would raise the shields. Cain bolted from his chair and dashed forward and slapped the young man's hands out of the way just before he would have actuated the control to raise the shields. "What the hell's wrong with you?" he barked at the clearly confused young officer.

Cain drew another deep breath to calm himself down, reminding himself that the kid had only just recently been assigned to the tactical officer's billet, then told him to, "Check the power level of that salvo." When the young officer just looked at him, totally befuddled, he said again, "Go on. Check it."

"Yes, sir...Skipper." The now very nervous young officer bounced his shaky fingers off a series of controls, and an even more sheepish expression swept across his features. "Salvo was at..." he began, then after a pause, continued sheepishly with embarrassment. "one one-hundredth of a percent power."

"Imagine that," Cain remarked, finding the capacity within him to ramp down his anger enough to replace it with thick sarcasm.

"They were rendering honors to *Enterprise*," he told the green T.O.

"Sorry, skipper."

"As you were."

Cain wasted no time stepping back to his command chair to sit, then started rubbing his forehead as though he were feeling greatly fatigued, which in fact he was. Finally, he looked up again and addressed the entire bridge crew.

"Look, I know we're all a bit nervous, but let's stay frosty, people. Let's get it done."

After a few moments he punched the comm button on the arm of his chair. "Cain to transporter room."

"Transporter room," came the response almost immediately.

"You got that transporter lock we talked about?"

"Aye, Skipper, but with the security deflector grid in place, we won't be able to beam him out."

Cain stared down at the sound of the errant voice coming over his armrest intercom. "Did I ask you to beam him anywhere?"

"No, Skipper," a nervous voice came back.

"That's right. I didn't. But, if there were to be any beaming, it might include beaming my transporter chief out into space."

He smirked and then switched off the intercom. He noticed several of the bridge officers looking at him with confused expressions.

"As you were."

CHAPTER 12

Enterprise

George had been resting in his quarters after having spent several hours reviewing last-minute diplomatic comms when Captain April had called him to let him know that they'd arrived at their destination, so he'd rushed to get ready and pulled on his jacket on the run, not wanting to keep President Alarius waiting.

As one of Starfleet's heroes of the first war, for him to show up in anything less than his full dress uniform would have been insulting to the Klingons—peace summit or not. He was selective, though, in which battle ribbons he wore. In fact, he chose to wear none at all. Only his rank and various non-battle-related honors decorated his uniform.

As he stepped down from the outer ring to the lower deck, George nodded politely to the middle-aged, sandy-haired gentleman standing to the captain's right—a medical officer, judging from the stylized caduceus on the left breast of his blue coveralls—then glanced briefly at Captain April's old sweater as he stopped and stood to the man's left. He'd been made aware before he came aboard that April suffered from a rare blood disease that left him feeling chilly all the time, but for some reason he just couldn't seem to get used to the idea of a Starfleet ship's captain wearing a sweater over his uniform. Somehow, it made him look less like a Starfleet officer and more like a fellow professor from the university.

"President Alarius will be up momentarily, sir," April said, apparently having picked up on George's arrival.

"Thank you, Captain," George replied.

April tilted his head toward the gentleman to his right and continued, "Allow me to introduce Doctor Philip Boyce, ship's chief medical officer."

"Doctor," George said, nodding to him again rather than try to reach across the captain to shake his hand, and suspecting that 'she' must have been something more to April than just a fine doctor.

"Sir," Boyce responded, his voice slightly scratchy.

April ran a tight ship, and in particular, the mood here felt especially all-business. Perhaps the mere thought that the President of the United Federation of Planets was aboard was enough to raise attention to protocol to heightened levels.

At the communications station, Lieutenant Commander Pike leaned on his hand against the console, still hovering over Lieutenant Armstrong, waiting for her to finish setting up the feed. "Any day now, Armstrong," he said. "You realize, of course, that this is probably the most important thing you're ever going to do, right?" he then told her, deadpan, as though he hadn't just told her a moment ago that it wasn't important. "Making history—that sort of thing? So, no pressure."

Just then the bridge elevator doors opened and out stepped several very effective looking members of the presidential security detail, all well-dressed in non-military clothing, and presumably all well armed as well. Everybody, including April, stood up to full attention as someone stepped out onto the bridge proper.

"President on deck!" Pike pronounced loudly as a tall, statuesque human female stepped between and forward through her security detail. President Xarabetahl Kai-Alarius was the first non-Earth UFP President to be elected, and was in her second term. Alarius was of mixed racial origins. Her primary earthbound roots were Chinese, while her off-world roots were Andorian. She had the luminescent light-blue eyes of your typical Andorian, but the dark, straight hair of Earth's Asian continent. She was altogether striking, intimidating, exuded experience and wisdom, and from the human male point of view, was beautiful for her age—whatever age that might be, as Andorians tended to outlive their human counterparts by some fifty years.

"Permission to come aboard, Captain?" President Alarius' voice was soft, soothing and almost musical in tone, and contrasted greatly with her imposing persona. She exuded both executive and comforter in a way that was very Lincoln-esque.

"Welcome aboard President Alarius," April said as he stayed in place, excluding the words 'permission granted' in his response. April had met with the presidential protocol official hours ago, before the President actually landed, and had gone over how to behave. The first rule was never to approach or offer your hand to shake. All approaching and hand-shake initiating would be done by the President. So, stood he did by his command chair, as unnatural as it felt. President Alarius immediately and gracefully walked down the steps to cross over to April, passing by George and Boyce in the process. She stopped squarely in front of April and extended her hand, which April clasped firmly.

"President Alarius," April repeated, following protocol.

"Captain," Alarius smiled as they held hands for a moment. "Thank you for your hospitality and your service in this unprecedented occasion."

"And for your leadership, we are profoundly honored to serve." April returned with a nod, then turned to George. "May I present George Kirk, with whom I believe you are already acquainted?"

Alarius smiled broadly and stepped toward George, offered her hand, which George took and she then clasped firmly with her other hand. "Captain Kirk," she beamed. "It is good to see you again. What a day, no?"

"President Alarius," Kirk smiled and nodded cordially. "Indeed, and it is a pleasure to see you again as well."

"Well, it seems we have a bit of protocol to tend to. Shall we, Captain?" Alarius turned to April, who in turn, shifted his gaze to lock with Pike, who was now back over at the comms station with Ensign Armstrong.

"Order the no-fly zone in force as of my mark," April ordered.

Pike turned and nodded to Armstrong, who activated something, waited for some sort of confirmation, and then turned to Pike and nodded back.

"All commands confirm no-fly zone in force, Captain," Pike responded.

"Open diplomatic channel," April ordered.

Pike nodded to Armstrong again, who stabbed one last control with her finger, then looked up at Pike.

"Chancellor Arkanon of the Klingon Empire is standing by," Pike pronounced to April, who turned to President Alarius. "Communications are yours, President Alarius."

And with that, President Alarius turned to face the front viewport, as everybody's gaze shifted likewise.

"President Alarius of the United Federation of Planets, Chancellor Arkanon of the Klingon Empire." Armstrong said perhaps the most important words she ever would, flawlessly and confidently, following which the forward main viewport coalesced the unmistakable image of a Klingon. Kalor Arkanon. But, while his skin was dark and he wore a long, drooping moustache and pointed goatee like many of his kind, that was where the similarities ended. His eyes were a piercing light blue and white—a rarity indeed among Klingons.

George couldn't help but draw comparisons to President Alarius' own striking eyes. Arkanon's dark hair was long and fairly shaggy, extending well past his shoulders—nothing remotely resembling the military cut that most Klingon warriors wore—and had already started to go gray. The pressures of leading the empire, no doubt. But the most obvious and pronounced difference in his appearance was the ridge of jagged bone that covered the length of his wide nose and brow and extended up the center of his bulbous forehead, disappearing into his hairline. George grinned slightly, trying to imagine what Captain April and the young officers around him might have been thinking.

President Alarius stepped forward. "Chancellor Arkanon."

"President Alarius. It is good to see you at long last." His voice definitely still had the powerful rasp and timber of Klingon vocal chords behind it, but there was a perceptible undertone of wisdom, even kindness there as well, perhaps from having had years to mellow after serving so many at war.

"Chancellor, on behalf of the United Federation of Planets, I thank you, and welcome you to Rigel Seven."

"Most kind. But then of course, considering what it is we are here to accomplish, might it not be more appropriate that we welcome you—to Klinzhai—as it is called in the ancient scrolls of Kahless?

"Peace, Chancellor, goes by many names, does it not?" Alarius smiled and kept the moment positive.

"That is does, President Alarius. That it does." Arkanon's gaze falls on George and he smiles broadly. "George, my very good friend, it is good—so very good to see you after so many years."

"You as well Chancellor," George smiled and stepped forward, just behind President Alarius.

There before him floated the image of a man with whom he'd once fought with at Tarsus Academy—and with whom had been best friends. Like George, Arkanon had amassed quite the heroes record during the first war. He, too, had never been defeated, and in what was perhaps the kindest stroke of luck for the both of them, neither had ever found himself facing the other in combat.

In the last two years, after Arkanon ascended to the chancellorship, he began to communicate privately with his childhood friend on the other side. It was these overtures that eventually led to this unlikely day when Terran and Klingon would shake hands across a table at perhaps the single most contested world in their decades long conflict.

All the old feelings from those school days were coming back as fresh as if they were new. Now, after two hard years of struggle and seemingly intractable loggerheads, The day of days was finally upon them. George took the initiative. "Chancellor, may I introduce Captain Robert April of the Federation flagship *Enterprise*?"

"Chancellor," April nodded a formal reply.

"Captain," Arkanon acknowledged with a slight nod of his head.

"Chancellor," April said, bowing slightly in return and gesturing briefly toward Pike, "My first officer, Lieutenant Commander Christopher Pike, and my chief medical officer, Doctor Phillip Boyce."

"Commander. Doctor." Arkanon nodded. Then he gestured toward someone on his side of the screen who looked very much like a government official and told them, "This is Minister Gorkon."

"It is good to see you again, Minister Gorkon," George said, nodding in his direction. "I can say without reservation that without the patience of Minister Gorkon, today would not be possible. His interest in Shakespeare gave us common ground on which to explore the undiscovered country."

"Well, President Alarius, shall we reconvene on the surface? I fear if we continue talking here, we will have nothing to talk about there.

"Agreed," Alarius smiled, then answered, "Until then, Chancellor."

And with that, Arkanon's holographic image dissolved, the polarization faded, and the view returned to that of the planet vista and the Klingon fleet.

CHAPTER 13

OMITTED

CHAPTER 14

The Fortress

Having endured yet another set of formalities after he landed with the Presidential party, including various honor guards and other protocols, and then having more or less repeated them as they were formally introduced to Chancellor Arkanon's party, George sat patiently in his seat upon the raised dais and gazed out over the sea of faces before him while yet another Federation delegate droned on at length from behind the modern podium that had been provided for the occasion.

Distracted, he gazed up at the bright, late afternoon sunlight that streamed in through the large, roughly diamond-shaped blood-red and amber stained-glass windows imbedded high up in the ancient fortress's vaulted ceiling, painting the cavernous throne room's cold tan-gray stone walls in a wash of fiery color that made them look almost as if they had been set ablaze.

There must have been nearly a thousand souls in attendance, each with their entourage of delegates and their support staffs. It was a virtual 'who's who' of the known galaxy. Stoic Vulcans dressed in long, dark, loose-fitting ceremonial robes with native script embroidered in silver or gold down the lengths of their closure flaps. Blue-skinned Andorians, whose antennae all seemed to react in unison to whoever's words came to them from the podium like plants turning to sunlight. Tellarites, bearded one and all, and clad in fur-trimmed silver, their upturned noses making them appear almost as arrogant as they typically tended to be. And of course he and his fellow humans. Representatives of all four original founding member worlds of the United Federation of Planets were there, and still the Klingon delegation outnumbered them by at least five to one, and a good four out of

five of them were uniformed soldiers. Warriors. Not so unexpected, considering they'd had to cross into 'enemy' space to attend the summit.

And what an important summit it had been, too. Despite the fact that the real negotiations had been concluded weeks ago, the gathering of the five governments for the ratification of the treaty and the subsequent closing ceremony had been a necessary symbol of unity. After all, with the Federation and the Klingon Empire having spent so much time on the brink of war, a few long hours of senseless but necessary symbolism seemed a small price to pay.

Seated in the long row of chairs with George and President Alarius on one side of the podium were some of the most important and influential members of the Federation worlds. There was simply no way he was going to remember all their names—much less pronounce them correctly. Across from them, on the other side of the podium, the Klingon contingent sat. He recognized Gorkon—maybe one of his staff—but that was about it. The others were a curious collection of highly decorated Klingon military officers, the most prominent among them being the legendary General Gast. Apart from Kalor Arkanon himself, Gast was the single most highly decorated warrior in the Imperial Klingon Fleet, which the myriad of medals and jeweled accouterments pinned to his gold sash clearly attested. None of them looked particularly happy, but then again, pretty much every Klingon had the same resting expression, so who knows whether or not they were happy. One of them was even dozing off—his toothy mouth agape and buried in his chest.

Tracking back from the Klingons, past the podium toward him, George let his gaze linger on several of the Starfleet brass, along with some more non-military attendees. He studied their expressions too as they listened to the speaker. Ambassador Sarek, one of the most regal looking Vulcans he'd ever seen, and with whom George had interfaced regularly during pre-negotiations, sat quietly and attentively to the left of the strikingly beautiful, even by human standards, Admiral T'Pol. While technically not a Starfleet officer, as evidenced by the dark blue uniform jacket she wore, the admiral had nonetheless been afforded the distinction of being the first Vulcan ever to serve with Starfleet. And she'd been serving for quite some time, too—since before the Federation had even been founded, in fact, begin-

ning soon after Starfleet launched its first warp-five capable starship...the NX-01 *Enterprise*.

To Admiral T'Pol's right sat the legendary Admiral turned President turned private citizen, Jonathan Archer, the man credited for making so many of Starfleet's successes over the last hundred years possible. In fact, he was one of only two humans to ever have set foot on the surface of Kronos—a feat that he'd accomplished shortly after taking command of the *Enterprise*. He and T'Pol had served aboard that vessel together and had been present at the official ceremonies for the founding of the Federation. At one hundred thirty years old, Admiral Archer, looked much older than his Vulcan counterpart, but there was still a sparkle in his eyes that nothing had ever come close to extinguishing. Looking at his face, it was difficult to tell if he was enjoying watching the fruits of his legacy play out before him, or if he was bored beyond all possible belief. His face was as difficult to read as the Klingons.

George suddenly realized that in all his years of service, surprisingly enough, he'd never actually met Archer in person. His father knew T'Pol personally and had some history—some bad history—with Archer, but that was a story unto itself.

George quickly dismissed his wandering thoughts. He'd dealt with that a long time ago. Breathing new life into it now would do no one any good.

Ambassador Shrel and Representative Drev sat peacefully side-by-side to Archer's right. Interesting how the Andorian and the Tellarite, whose worlds had once been such bitter enemies, had accepted their seats being put together without protest. A good omen perhaps?

Then, right by the podium, to the left sat President Alarius, and on the other side, Chancellor Arkanon. Somehow they were fully engaged and attentive to every droning word that tumbled from the monotone delegate from hell.

The crowd suddenly stood and applauded—even the Vulcans, though no doubt they only joined in because it seemed the logical thing to do—and George suddenly realized that he hadn't even been listening to Arkanon's introduction. As he stepped up to the podium, he threw him a brief toothy Klingon smile. George returned it with one of his own, along with a nod.

As he slipped two fingers down inside his jacket collar and gave it a tug—someday Starfleet would learn how to make a comfortable dress uniform—he had no idea what Arkanon planned to say, but there was one thing that he did know. His old friend's speech would surely be a memorable one, forever associated with the occasion. Arkanon was the only classmate he'd ever had who could tell a story better than he could. Then again, he was a Klingon, and Klingons told great stories.

"'A great warrior who falls for a lesser cause is not as great as a lesser warrior who falls for a great cause,'" Arkanon began, his commanding baritone voice resonating off the cold, hard hewn stone walls as his audience hung in rapt silence on his every syllable as they listened to the translation through small earpieces. "'To live for others is the first duty. To fight for others is the last.' From my favorite translation of the first scroll, words written by the very hand of Kahless himself. Both warrior and philosopher, our first emperor spoke these words as he stood before his most loyal warriors...The Five…right here in the fortress of Qam-Chee, in this great hall, so many centuries ago. Meanwhile, outside these walls, an enemy numbering more than five hundred warriors lay siege. So much of our Klingon history was lost when our brother planet Gastillion wandered off so long ago—lost to the cosmos and the ages. We on Kronos had only ancient scrolls and stories passed down through the ages, and the myth of Kahless. Then colonists from Earth found our lost brother world, and for a hundred years they settled alongside our ancient Kalar brothers—and not always pleasantly.

George looked upon his old friend with awe. He knew the story Kalor was telling. Every Klingon knew this most sacred of stories. How far his old friend had come since their school days at Tarsus Academy. How legendary he had become among his own kind. He was holding his audience spellbound. He was witnessing living history. Even President Alarius was a lesser presence in comparison.

"'I have failed you, my Five,' Kahless said as tears ran down his face, 'for surely we are now on the eve of the abyss, and tomorrow I shall look upon your faces no more.' Then at midnight, in the flickering glow of fire and torch, witnessed before the eyes of his loyal Five, Kahless and his lover, Lukara, were joined for all time. But even as this happened, from outside in the darkness of a moonless night, the

enemy attacked and breached the walls. As the battle raged, our new queen was the first to die."

George let his eyes wander across the faces of the assembly of soldiers and diplomats from all corners of the known galaxy. He locked eyes briefly with Arkanon's most trusted minister, Gorkon, who exchanged a silent nod with him before turning his eyes back to his mentor. Gorkon had served with Arkanon throughout the bulk of his military career—always at his side. When the first war ended, Gorkon had left the Imperial Fleet to follow his friend into the quagmire that was Klingon politics on Kronos. Gorkon was an old soul, and one could imagine his wisdom, especially mentored by Arkanon. Both were lights in the darkness.

"It is said," Arkanon continued, "that in his despair and fury over Lukara's death, Kahless led his Five and slaughtered all five-hundred of the enemy, the last falling before the light of the next morning. And then, as the first fingers of morning starfire pulled the night into the depths of the great waters, Kahless walked alone to stand far out upon the last rock that dared defy the crashing waves beyond and held his bat'leth high above his head toward the rising sun, and his warrior's soul left his body in a roar...and with a mighty swing he smote his bat'leth asunder on that rock. Kahless fell to his knees and swore on the two pieces of his broken bat'leth, 'From the light of this day and for all time, I shall fight no more.'"

The storytelling prowess that George had witnessed so many times so many years ago had come full circle. George had always considered himself a bit of a wordsmith, and in his own circles he was, but what Arkanon was doing was simply extraordinary to watch. He, like everyone else seated in the ancient fortress throne room, was not just listening to Arkanon's words. He was feeling them resonate in his very soul. He could only imagine how the Klingons among them must have felt, hearing their most sacred legend spoken aloud by such a master storyteller.

"In the span of a single night, Kahless had united his people for all time to this day. Then, as the sun began to set, and as the last of the fallen had been honored, a great storm darkened the skies over the sea, Kahless announced to his people that he was leaving them with his queen. He raged at their protests, 'You need no one but yourselves. I will go to Sto-Vo-Kor!' But Kahless could not deny his love

for his people, and he promised them that one day he would return. And then Kahless ordered his Loyal Five to place him and his dead queen on a raft of great timbers, and to push them out on the great waters of the angry sea. And just as he began to fall below the horizon, Kahless raised his hand and pointed into the sky at Qo'noS, and he called over the fury of wave and thunder to his Five and said, 'Look for me there on that point of light. For from there I shall return.' And as the storm blew in, Kahless and Lukara were seen no more—joined forever in the abyss."

Suddenly and without warning, every Klingon in the room rose to their feet as one, drawing mixed reactions of alarm from the delegates and their staffs as they began to raise their voices in an angry roaring chorus. They started low and then grew louder and louder until they reached a thunderous crescendo that lasted for several moments before they finally struck their fists hard against their chests and turned their eyes skyward.

And just as suddenly, a silence as thunderous as that roar filled the throne room as so many of the delegates shocked by the unexpectedly fearsome display continued to look on in alarm, not knowing what might come next.

But the display had come as no surprise at all to George, or to anyone else who might have been familiar with the Klingon custom. So, just to alleviate any rising fears, and to make sure that everyone knew the roar of respect in honor of Kahless had been an expected part of the closing ceremony—even though it really hadn't been—George rose from his chair and started clapping his hands as loudly as he could, until the sharp echoes bouncing off of the ancient stone walls finally drew everyone from their seats to join him in a rousing round of applause. Arkanon bowed his head toward them to show his appreciation.

Moments later the applause began to die down and the delegates took their seats, but all eyes remained on Arkanon. Behind him, as silence once more returned to the hall, Minister Gorkon rose from his chair and approached him, carrying an ornate bat'leth in his hands. He handed it off to Arkanon, and Arkanon held it proudly in what might have been some sort of parade hold.

"Stories like these are treasures to the Klingon peoples," the chancellor began anew, and George noted his use of the Terran pronunciation of his race name. He was talking to everyone now, not just to his own people. "Here on our birth world, they were told over and over again, passed down through the ages. But when our ancestors journeyed to Kronos, many of the scrolls were lost for millennia until our first star children returned home to rediscover them. They learned they had muddled the true meaning of Kahless' words. Words like honor and victory had been twisted into meaningless concepts. We were not meant to die well, but to live well. Today may be a good day to die, but tomorrow would be better. War is an old star that consumes itself in magnificent fury, but leaves neither victor nor vanquished...only ashes. So here, on this day and in this historical place, I stand before both Klingon and Terran and call on all of us to release our warrior's spirit on the dawn of this new day...to be carried away by the eternal winds of the stars...and to fight the wrong fight no more!"

Everyone rose once more and honored Arkanon with a standing ovation that seemed to go on endlessly. Fueling the raucous fury of applause even further, Arkanon brandished the bat'leth that Gorkon had given him. Then, raising it above his head with a hand on each end, he brought it down hard against his knee, breaking it into two halves, and then he held those two halves aloft, high above his head, to the continuing applause. He then walked over to President Alarius and presented one half to her, which she stood to accept and both raised the broken pieces to thunderous applause, which continued as both leaders walked back to the podium, which Arkanon relinquished to Alarius, who stood, regarding her half of the broken weapon, waiting patiently for the applause to abate. When it did and the crowd returned to their seats once again, President Alarius stepped forward, and after a few moments of silence, spoke.

"Is it not better to argue for a thousand years than to kill for a day and eliminate a thousand generations?"

The room erupted once again in applause as George smiled as he recognized the words he'd spoken just a couple of days ago in a classroom back on Earth.

"I am the first president of the United Federation of Planets who is not from Earth. On my home world of Canopius, I and generations of my people are sons and daughters of our greatest storyteller. Today Tarbold's words are especially appropriate as the sons and daughters of this world can once again call it home."

A round of applause erupts and falls silent, and Alarius continues. "Long ago, on another world called Earth, a Terran named Abraham Lincoln once gave a speech at a critical time during a great civil war. It was a short speech but one that engraved itself on the pages of Earth's history. I will follow that example of brevity here today and introduce the true architect of this great moment, without whose tireless efforts none of this would be possible." She gestured toward George. "Starfleet Captain George Samuel Kirk."

George stood up, and once again the entire assembly rose from their seats and applauded vigorously as he walked toward Alarius, pausing briefly to clasp hands with Kalor Arkanon. After a few words drowned by the cheers and applause, George continued to the podium, where President Alarius surprised him by handing him the other half of the broken bat'leth.

Alarius and George shook hands and as Alarius stepped back to reseat herself, George raised the bat'leth half-high over his head to yet another crescendo of applause. George smiled as he planted his feet behind the podium. He regarded his half of the bat'leth for one more moment, then set it down out of view. He leaned slightly toward the microphone somewhere unseen on the podium and began, "As we on Earth like to say at moments like this, is this thing on?"

He knew how to find and win over a crowd, and soon a rousing chorus of laughter and applause swept through the assembly. He turned and looked at Arkanon, and found him likewise beset with laughter, baring his teeth and roaring with delight. He picked up his half of the broken bat'leth once more, looked it over, and then held it out over the podium.

"They just don't make things like they used to," he proclaimed, and once again a wave of laughter and applause coursed through his audience. When it died down, he stepped up closer to the podium, allowed his own smile to fall from his face, and gave himself over to the seriousness that the moment deserved. He set

the broken half of the bat'leth back down and regarded his listeners for a moment. Then he began in earnest.

"Since I know I'll never match the incomparable storytelling of my good friend, I'll get right to the point. This historic planet upon whose surface we now find ourselves coming together at this moment—we called it Rigel Seven. Klingons know it as their lost brother world Gastillion. Some eighty-two years ago, colonists from Earth ran aground on this ancient world and in typical Earth fashion, laid claim—once again at the unfortunate expense of the native inhabitants of some distant land—or world. Ancient structures such as this great fortress were discovered, and the links to Kronos were clear. The long-believed myth of the origins of the Klingon had been rediscovered at long last. But as is so often the case, Earth's settlers were unwilling to forgo profit to be on the right side of history. The story of Earth's history is full of uncomfortable chapters of our lesser nature. Our presence on this ancient world is such a chapter. Without going into the complicated recent history that set Terran and Klingon at war—something with which we're all quite familiar—suffice it to say that ownership of this world became a major point of contention between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. But finally, here in the great hall of this fortress where the greatest story in Klingon history played out ages ago, it is today going to be the place where new pages are written in the stories of both Klingon and Terran."

Applause broke out once again. George smiled and nodded politely as he waited for it to abate. Then he went on. "So, on behalf of and with the full authority of the United Federation of Planets, I officially return this ancient world back to its rightful owners."

With those words, Captain George Samuel Kirk had made history. Everyone present knew it, and without exception they responded with a very appropriate, and in the case of both the Earth and the Klingon delegations, a very enthusiastic standing ovation.

CHAPTER 15

Old Friends

Later that evening, the largest of the fortress' many upper chambers—a spacious and long room that in ages long past must have served as a formal dining space—was now crowded with hundreds of representatives from half a dozen species, who at one time or another over the last century, had all been the enemies of at least one other of those present. The summit had gone well and all that was left were the formalities of tomorrow's departure ceremony in the great courtyard.

Finding himself momentarily by himself, having just successfully disengaged himself from a philosophical debate between an upstart delegate from Andoria and an older, experienced Tellerite ambassador, he slipped his right hand into his pants pocket and fingered the small data module there. He'd managed to keep it a secret since its delivery a week ago back in Gettysburg. Winona almost stumbled on it when he was in the shower. She'd picked up his pants to fold them and it had fallen out. Thinking nothing of it, she simply set it on the table beside the chair where she'd placed his folded pants. What he'd seen on the module shook him to the core, and had hung like a black cloud over him every moment of every day, and yet he could say nothing of it. The warning on it had been so dire, that it had threatened to not only end the summit before it had even started, but to hurl the Federation and the Klingon Empire into the galactic war already brewing on the horizon. Fortunately the grave predictions had not materialized, and the summit had been a success even far beyond his own expectations. Still, the implications made on that module were disturbing and dangerous.

Realizing he must have looked strange, having been standing and staring off into the distance for quite some time as he ruminated, he turned his attention back

on the present. Growing up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania with a big history buff for a father had instilled in him a great respect for history and the places where it was made. Certainly the presence of Kahless pervaded every weather-worn stone in the ancient fortress, and when word had reached him of what the Diplomatic Corps was planning to do, he'd become concerned about preserving the room's natural condition and hadn't wanted to risk ruining it. But they had their orders. Then Arkanon had reminded him that on this day they were making history that was perhaps just as important, and had assured him that everything would be all right—that there were literally hundreds of such fortresses scattered across the planet, and that they would remain as they were because Klingons tended to respect the wear of time and nature on things. George still hadn't been thrilled with the idea, but he supposed that if the Klingons didn't mind, then no harm done.

Looking strangely out of place, given their surroundings, holographic light panels floated at various intervals high overhead, illuminating the large room in a warm yellow-amber. Banners and flags from every represented world in every imaginable shape and color draped down from all four walls. Several long tables presented an endless cuisine from all corners of the known galaxy—all shapes, sizes, colors, and states of evolution—an exhaustive presentation fit for ambassadors, presidents, and emperors alike. It was the selection of meats that drew most of his attention as he slowly strolled past one of the tables on his way toward the balcony door to get some air. Most of them were cooked and looked quite appetizing, and emitted mouthwatering aromas. However, there were also a few that he had no intention of sampling, no matter how hungry he might get—the living and squirming variety especially.

"You first. I'm afraid it might be somebody I know," a voice came over his left shoulder. It was Commander Alexander Marcus of the *Lexington*, Captain Garth's first officer. Marcus wore what might easily have been mistaken as a smile on his face, but his remark was a thinly veiled jab at anything and everything Klingon. George had only been introduced to him once, a year back, and had found him to be abrasive. Captain Garth was an up-and-comer—someone on the fast-track. Some at the academy called him a tactical genius. How he'd ended up with this horse's ass for a first officer perplexed him.

"Captain Kirk," a deep voice bellowed from his other side. George turned to find a youthful Klingon official whom he immediately recognized holding two glasses of a teal-colored liquid, one of which he extended toward him. With deafening silence, Marcus exited the conversation by pushing between the two of them instead of moving around them and was off...thankfully.

"Minister Gorkon," George greeted him with a smile as he accepted the drink. Of the Klingon officials closest to Arkanon, Gorkon was the only one whom he felt he could possibly trust. Arkanon had even said as much on the memory module he had secreted to him. "What a day," George said innocuously, turning immediately to the safety of small talk as he gently swirled the liquid around in his glass. It was a Klingon alcohol that he couldn't seem to recall the name of, but he could feel its chill on his fingers through the glass.

"By this time tomorrow all human presence on this world will be gone," Gorkon began before his voice became sincere. "I shall regret yours."

"A regretful Klingon, and I was here to witness it," George remarked. They shared a laugh. "Maybe I'll buy a summer home here?" He added.

There was something about Arkanon's protégé. Gorkon had a wisdom far beyond his years and the traits of a natural born leader—and he embodied an entire generation of like-thinking young Klingons who questioned the old order. It was obvious that Arkanon was maneuvering him into a position where he might fall in line to lead the empire some day. He raised his glass. "To peace. We couldn't have done it without your help, Gorkon."

"We Klingons don't have a word for peace. To the undiscovered country?" Gorkon offered instead, raising his glass to George's.

George smiled and narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the same time. "You know your Shakespeare."

"To know Shakespeare is to know the human soul," Arkanon's familiar voice sounded from behind them as he stepped up beside George. "I like your President."

"Maybe we'll keep her then," George half-joked, knowing that by her aligning herself against the more hawkish among the Federation could very easily end her presidency.

Arkanon's smile faded slightly as his eyes focused several yards beyond Kirk's shoulder, where General Gast and Captain Chang, two young and unabashed pillars of the opposition to everything that was going on, were clearly not enjoying themselves. Then he glanced briefly at Gorkon, who silently seemed to share a look of understanding at the sight.

"The air has become a little stale," Gorkon said, darting his gaze toward Gast and Chang. "I believe I shall go for a walk outside." And with a slight bow to both, he excused himself from their company and walked off.

"Gorkon's contacts in the Vulcan High Council really paid off," George said as his gaze lingered in the direction Gorkon had departed their company.

"You and I? We have changed the future," Arkanon replied. "Gorkon is that future. If everything we have accomplished is to last, it will be for him and those like him who make it so."

"Come," Arkanon said after his gaze fell once again on Gast and his minions. "Let's get some fresh air as well."

Arkanon put his hand on George's shoulder and walked him out of the room, with several members of his protective security detail keeping pace a few feet behind them. He led him down a short guarded corridor, and before George knew it he had accompanied his friend out onto a spacious turret under the cool purple veil of twilight that looked out over the outer plaza far below. They approached the waist-high safety wall and looked down for a moment at the various diplomatic transports and shuttles parked there in a number of loosely arranged rows that stretched right to the edge of the rocky seawall, where the slowly undulating violet-black sea crashed in rhythmic explosions of blue-white foam against the jagged rocks, spewing wind-swept curtains of saltwater mist into the air as high as the glistening golden spires atop the outer wall. Then they turned to gaze out across the seemingly endless sea at the massive, heavily cratered gray-white moon as it

slowly rose from beyond the darkening horizon on its way to dominate the diamond-studded heavens.

Arkanon drew a deep breath and let it out in something somewhere between a simple exhale and a growl as he took in the panorama. Then he said, "Magnificent, is it not?"

"That it is," George genuinely agreed.

"To think that Kahless himself once gazed out onto this." Arkanon allowed himself to become absorbed in the moment, then concluded, "We Klingons are fortunate to have rediscovered our lost history here."

"Great speech by the way. You certainly haven't lost your touch, my friend," George said with a smile.

Arkanon looked at his old friend. "It is truly good to see you again, George."

"You as well, my friend," George replied before adding, "Considering—" He pulled the small data module that had been silently vexing him from his jacket and held it up.

"Ah, yes," Arkanon said with a smile of recognition, then took it and turned it over in his hand. "Obviously you looked at it."

"I have to admit, what I saw was —" George paused, not knowing exactly how to continue.

"Indeed," Arkanon finished for him in a heavy tone, but then smiled, "But here we are, you and I. Standing here, talking about it." He pressed the module back into the palm of George's hand and closed his fingers into a fist around it. "Keep it…a memento—a story to tell to your children and grandchildren."

George glanced at the module one last time, then slipped it back into his pocket.

Arkanon again gazed out on the horizon and after a moment, his tone became serious. "But I fear for the future, George. One historic summit won't change that."

"Well, I've had my own suspicions for some time, I also have to admit," George advised him, lowering his voice to match Arkanon's concerned tone. "Earth history is full of moments of hope like this...'peace in our time' and so on...only to be dashed."

"There is even a movement within our government calling for an alliance with the Romulans," Arkanon spoke even lower, just short of a whisper.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend?" George remarked in monotone. But in the privacy of his own thoughts he reacted with fear and suspicion, not to mention surprise at the mere mention of the Romulans after so many decades. Earth hadn't heard anything from her old nemesis since the establishment of the Neutral Zone that had formally ended that war.

"There is only one true constant in this universe," Arkanon declared, "and that is that there is too much profit to be made in the business of war."

"The military industrial complex. Eisenhower," George added. "You did pay attention in class."

"But enough on these things," Arkanon suddenly proclaimed, initiating a formal change of subject. "How are those sons of yours?"

"They're doing well," George answered, letting a bit of pride slip into his voice. "Sam is a Starfleet cadet now, and little Jimmy? He's got it in his head to go away to school on Tarsus Four."

"You should let him go. Perhaps he will find a lifelong friend there, as I did."

"And your son?" George asked in return.

"Prath. Very passionate, that one," Arkanon started almost dismissively. "He has the heart of a warrior, but he tries too hard to impress his father."

"I wonder where he gets that?" George joked, spinning a little sarcasm at his friend.

The two old friends looked out from the stony turret of the fortress onto the spectacular panorama. "Which rock was it, I wonder?" George pondered aloud.

Suddenly there was commotion behind them as a Federation security detail stepped outside, followed by President Alarius, who smiled as she approached Kirk and Arkanon.

"Here's a scene for the ages. But somehow I see two young students at the Tarsus Academy long ago. We are fortunate such a friendship was forged then that would one day save us all."

"President Alarius," George said respectfully, then turned to Arkanon, "Chancellor, if you'll excuse me, I'll leave you both to plan the future—"

"Not at all. Please remain with us," Alarius countered before he could finish. "Besides, I wish to hear stories of your days at Tarsus. I imagine it to have been much like Harry Potter—without the magic."

CHAPTER 16

Enterprise

Sitting patiently in the center seat with his arms folded across his chest to help keep himself warm, Captain April was tired. What's more, his crew was too. It had been nearly thirty-six hours since *Enterprise* had arrived, but really, his crew had been on yellow alert since leaving Earth.

Such heightened tension for so many uneventful hours was beginning to take a mental and physical toll. So much so, in fact, that in a quick ships-to-ships conference just five hours ago, all seven captains had finally decided to suspend all drills until further notice. Tension, boredom and fatigue were a deadly combination on a starship.

Space was a dangerous place.

His eyes wandered to the main viewport and came to rest on *Farragut* as she drifted into view in the lower right corner. *Farragut's* presence was largely symbolic—and for some Klingons, an unpleasant reminder of less than favorable outcomes to battles when George Kirk commanded her. *Farragut* was a symbol of the past. *Enterprise* was a symbol of the future.

And then there was the *Archer*. She was there because of who she was named for—Jonathan Archer, Captain of the *Enterprise* and the only human who'd ever set foot on Kronos and lived to tell about it. Although he'd been accompanied at the time by then Vulcan sub-commander T'Pol, the Klingons viewed that detail as insignificant. Archer was the one they remembered…fondly.

As for his starship namesake, April didn't know *Archer's* Captain Chavez personally. He'd met him for the first time at the pre-summit security briefings in San

Francisco. But Chavez had instantly struck him as one to watch, and Captain Robau had added to that perception by commenting that in all his years of watching officers fresh from the academy make their first stop on *Kelvin*, only George Kirk had impressed him more than Jairo Chavez had.

Robau, on the other hand—a fixture in Starfleet—was a man April knew very well. He'd been instrumental in George Kirk's advancement through the ranks, as he had been for so many others through the years, including Varian Cain. Kirk and Cain had met aboard *Kelvin* when Kirk was serving as Robau's X.O. and had quickly become the best of friends. Then, barely a year into the First War, Robau had fast-tracked Kirk to the X.O. billet aboard *Farragut*, and when *Farragut's* skipper was plucked off to Fleet Command, Kirk suddenly found himself in the hot seat and Robau sent Cain over to be his X.O.

Things certainly happened fast in those days, April reminisced.

Robau was content to command *Kelvin* in perpetuity and had watched those under his command rise through the ranks. A protégé of Admiral Archer himself during the admiral's last few years as Dean of Starfleet Academy, it had been all but inevitable that his *Kelvin*, being an older vessel, would become the de-facto cadet training ship sometime before Archer retired. Robau had built a well-earned reputation for being a commanding officer who made quick work of separating the chaff from the wheat. If a cadet cut it on *Kelvin*, they could cut it anywhere. He ran a tight ship, though, and every former captain who met him again later in his or her career addressed him as Captain Robau or sir, regardless of rank, because, frankly, he outranked them all in practical experience.

April gazed at the dozens of starships cluttered above the curving purplish horizon of Rigel VII. They looked as though someone had spilled them from a can. He could make out the closer ones—a Vulcan diplomatic cruiser, a pair of Andorian command cruisers, and a Tellarite corvette. Actually a hornets' nest would be a better analogy. Upon arrival, the Tellarite captain had been furious to discover that the Andorians had sent two ships when his government had only sent one, but after a few minutes of hot-headed hollering and complaining, he had settled down.

Beyond them, the nine Klingon D-6 battlecruisers drifted menacingly in their three-ship formations. Should something go sideways, no doubt they were ready to go on the attack. April had fought against the Klingons in several significant engagements during the First War, and for all the oft maligning of their harsh cultural practices and some of their personal habits, they were formidable tacticians. They could also lay claim to one very significant achievement that Starfleet could not. They had actually defeated the Romulans, while Earth had had to settled for a cease fire.

The tactical officer suddenly tensed and sat forward in his chair. His eyes locked onto the holographic tactical grid in his console. His fingers danced over his panel for a moment. "Captain," he finally called out. "I have a no-flag entering the quarantine zone. Sector four."

April stood and stepped up beside his tactical officer. No-flag was Starfleet terminology that referred to any space vessel that failed to broadcast its universal identification beacon, or UIB, in accordance with accepted interstellar law. April tapped a control that brought up a holographic tactical that appeared to float in three dimensions in the center of the main viewport depicting Rigel VII and its massive purple moon. Twenty bright ships' silhouettes in various shades of blue or green, each one tagged with glowing colored radical that identified it. "Perimeter patrols already responding," The T.O. added. Chances were that this was just some uninformed merchant ship captain hoping to score a haul of relics for a handy profit. Whoever it was, they were in for one hell of a surprise. No doubt the perimeter patrols will likely have dispensed with this violator long before things got much further along. Still, for the sake of discipline, he would follow security protocols implicitly.

"Up front," April called out.

Rigel VII and its moon shrank away and shifted to the left as the computer extrapolated the ship's sensor input and swooshed and zoomed onto a single pulsating red blip near the edge of the system moving rapidly in their direction. The tactical officer immediately tapped a few controls on his console and a bright red line

appeared in the display, originating at the red blip and sweeping right, ending on the surface of Rigel VII.

"They're headed straight for it," April observed aloud, not sounding particularly alarmed.

"The Tellerites again?" the tactical officer offered.

"Not likely," April stated matter-of-factly. "Hail and warn them off," he then barked aside to the comms officer as he continued studying the tactical display. But the possibility was there. Tellarites bristled at rules. Rule number one for Tellerites was to break all the other rules. They were the angry drunks of the Federation and confrontation was their mission statement.

"Aye, sir," the comms officer acknowledged, and activated several controls.

April knew it was pointless to warn the ship off now that it was already through the perimeter. It would be boarded and impounded and the captain detained. If it was the Tellerites, they deserved it. If not, well, that captain was going to have a bad day.

"A navigation and a communication error at the same time? What are the chances?" the tactical officer proffered as both continued watching the blip move toward Rigel VII.

April wasn't really listening as a playback of various scenarios that they had identified back in San Francisco raced through his mind. Everything from a simple mistake by an uninformed merchant to terrorism to an all-out attack by Romulan forces had been gamed out. All were considered to be equally valid threat vectors, though after more than eighty years of silence, attack by Romulan forces was a remote possibility. Romulans only showed up at the table when they had something in the game. They were practical. If they showed up at your door, chances are you did something to bring them there. Then again, he thought to himself, maybe this summit was upsetting some sort of galactic apple cart of which they were unaware. The Klingons and Romulans did share a large common border, but their intergalactic relations were a mystery to all but themselves.

Then something else occurred to him. Whoever this was had waited until the waning hours of the summit to make their move. Why wait so late in the game? It was a done deal. What's the point?

"Order the fleet to red alert." April spoke loudly as he turned toward Pike.

Without hesitation, Pike punched the ship-wide. "This is the X.O.," he announced. "Red alert. Repeat, red alert." Immediately the red alert beacons began flashing to the shrill wail of the accompanying klaxon.

"*Enterprise* to all commands. Red alert—copy—red alert." the comms officer repeated a couple times firmly, then turned to April. "All commands copy red alert, Captain."

Suddenly the cadence of the room changed. "Scanners resolve a scout-class vessel of unknown origin," the T.O. updated.

"No response to hails to the no-flag, Captain," the comms officer followed.

"He just went to warp!" the T.O. suddenly exclaimed as he looked up at April, clearly alarmed.

April spun to his chair and slammed his fist down on the ship-to-ship intercom button. "*Enterprise* to *Farragut*!"

CHAPTER 17

*Farragut

"A suicide run," Cain responded to April's holographic image on the main viewport, having anticipated his call. Behind his image, the Klingon squadrons quickly left formation and accelerated out of orbit while the other two squadrons shifted their positions to compensate for their absence.

"Intruder now at warp one point six five!" the *Enterprise* T.O.'s excited voice echoed over the ship-to-ship. "Three Klingon battlecruisers moving to intercept!"

"We'll engage with the Klingons," April quickly decided. "You get those deleGates off the surface as fast as you can."

"Understood. *Farragut* out."

Cain closed the channel, then spun around to face the comms officer. "Initiate Emergency evacuation!" Then, without waiting for the officer to acknowledge his order, he spun front and thumbed his ship-to-ship intercom again. "*Archer* and *Kelvin*, prepare to receive incoming shuttles! And get on the horn to whoever it takes and get them to switch off that deflector grid so we can use the transporters!" He slammed his fist down on his chair, drew a deep breath and sighed, then mumbled, "Why do I always have to be right?"

CHAPTER 18

Starfleet One

Hundreds of twinkling stars shone like scattered diamonds in that darkness, and billions more sparkled like diamond dust within the long smoke-like mass of the galactic arm that stretched from one horizon to the other like a giant archway across the heavens.

President Alarius, George Kirk and Kalor Arkanon hadn't noticed any of it, or if they had they'd both chosen to ignore it, caught up as they were in reminiscing over their exploits at the Tarsus Academy so many years ago. They might have gone on reminiscing right up until dawn, too, had they been left to it, but their security details suddenly came running out onto the turret side-by-side as though they'd been working together for years, with Doctor Boyce following close behind, any lingering suspicions or insecurities they might have felt toward one another seemingly evaporated, replaced by something just short of professional panic.

"What is it?" Arkanon demanded of his detail chief, clearly unhappy with the interruption.

"President Alarius—Chancellor Arkanon—we are evacuating the surface," the chief answered immediately, thumping his fist to his chest in the Klingon equivalent of a salute.

The Chancellor began conversing with his guards in their own language.

"What's this about?" Alarius asked the chief of his detail.

"President Alarius, there's an unidentified ship in the no-fly zone, sir," the lieutenant replied. "It's not answering hails and it's on a collision course for the planet. We're evacuating everyone."

"Are you certain?" George asked.

"He's at warp," Alarius' detail chief came back urgently. "We must go now."

"Yes, of course," Arkanon finally agreed, his expression softening to one of concern as he locked eyes with George.

"We must stay together," Alarius pronounced firmly. "A show of unity is crucial. We have worked too hard for this."

"Agreed," Arkanon came back just as resolved.

George locked knowing gazes with Arkanon. Whatever was going on, it was most likely related to the fears they had discussed earlier. For the sake of the summit and for the treaty, and for everything they had worked so hard to achieve, the atmosphere of unity could not be sacrificed.

"Evacuate as many delegates as you can on my transport. I will go with President," Arkanon decreed, locking gazes with Alarius, both showing resolve. "President?"

"The Chancellor is with us," Alarius commanded.

"Excellency—" Arkanon's lead security soldier started to protest.

"It is my command," Arkanon left no ambiguity.

Working together as a single team, the combined executive security details quickly ushered Alarius, George, Arkanon, and Boyce off the turret and hustled them inside, then herded them quickly through the still crowded banquet hall.

"Team one to Shooting Star. Blue Star and Red Giant enroute. Copy, joint evac." Alarius' detail chief announced into his earpiece as they walked purposefully.

The delegates took notice of the sudden and rushed group on the move, and while news of the crisis apparently hadn't been communicated yet, growing concern could clearly be seen in their eyes as they were manhandled aside to allow Arkanon, Alarius, George and the security details to egress.

"Why haven't they started beaming anyone up?" George called out as the group hustled down some stairs.

"The security barrier's been sabotaged! We can't switch it off!"

Kirk knew that everyone here had either beamed down or had flown down in several waves.

"There's no way everybody will fit on these transports! They need to get that security deflector down so they can be beamed out!" Kirk yelled.

"We know! They're working on it!" was all he got back.

George, Alarius and Arkanon locked eyes and chilling expressions of mutual dread passed between them as they rushed along.

From beside another Klingon transport craft, Minister Gorkon and his aides watched the group as they rushed out into the spacious fortress courtyard, which had already become a beehive of frantic activity. Gorkon briefly locked gazes with Arkanon. The past and the future collided as mentor and heir apparent and both shared a moment of understanding that only Klingons could.

Some of the transports had already powered up but seemed to be going nowhere.

"Why aren't they leaving?" Arkanon bellowed as he caught sight of his own executive transport.

"Nobody is allowed to take off until the President's party is away!"

"You order those transports to take off right now!" Alarius's normally smooth voice came back unusually harsh as she grabbed his shoulder. "Do it now!"

"Executive over-ride. Clear all transports to take off now. Repeat, executive over-ride," Alarius' detail chief barked into his earpiece as *Starfleet One* came into view. It was well off from the other ships and surrounded by a dozen heavily armed MACO's positioned in twenty-feet intervals.

Alarius paused as she caught sight of a crowd of Tellerites trying to push their way into a transport that was obviously not going to fit them all.

"Bring them with us!" Alarius pointed at them past the security chief's face.

The security chief was obviously greatly frustrated at having to go so off-book, but instantly grabbed another of the team and repeated what Alarius had ordered, but added, "as many as you can in one minute. At one minute we take off."

The boarding ramp was already angled down from the sleek swept winged presidential spacecraft as Alarius, Arkanon, George, Boyce and the rest of the group hurried up it into the underbelly of the transport.

"All posts, Shooting Star is now *Starfleet One*," came the official announcement over the comms of President Alarius' presence aboard the executive starship transport.

"For you," Boyce's voice suddenly exploded in George's ear from behind him.

He turned to find Boyce holding his open communicator out to him. Diplomatic protocols had precluded George from bringing one of his own. He took it and paused on the ramp while everyone else pushed past. "Kirk!"

"George!" Cain barked. "I've got a transporter lock on you! I'll beam you off as soon as you clear the security deflector shield!"

"No! Focus on the delegates! When that shield goes down there will still be more down here! George yelled over the loud chaos inside *Starfleet One*.

"George, for God's sake!"

George stood on the extended ramp just short of the hatch, shouting over the din into his communicator as a few Tellerite stragglers pushed past him. "Get those delegates out of here! Kirk out!" He flipped the communicator closed and took one last look at the mass of delegations and support staff frantically crowding into their various shuttles, some of which were finally lifting off and streaking toward the sky. With a last look, he turned and double-timed up the ramp and inside as the ship began to vibrate beneath his feet.

No sooner had the ramp raised flush with the underbelly of *Starfleet One*, that it lurched aloft, spun around and accelerated skyward with the thundering ignition of its main engines.

The inside of *Starfleet One* was a frantic bustle of activity.

George, Boyce, President Alarius, Chancellor Arkanon and their entourages had been taken to the executive compartment, while their staffs and some of their security contingents were crowded with the Tellerites.

Steadying himself on the bulkheads, George was given the 'go' by one of President Alarius' security detail to continue into the executive compartment. He found himself at what almost looked like some sort of mini-summit—all the major players intimately crowded into the tight quarters of the onboard conference room. If it weren't for being dressed for the occasion, everything had a peculiar informality. Some were standing and some were seated. Both Chancellor Arkanon and President Alarius were seated next to each other, and there was an empty seat next to him, so he made his way over.

George caught Arkanon's gaze and found him looking at that big-toothed Klingon smile of his as he patted the empty seat beside him. If he hadn't known better, he might have suspected the Chancellor was actually enjoying the whole thing. He was perhaps the only one in the room smiling until George smiled back at him before making his way over to sit down.

The ship shuddered and shook, obviously pushing for orbit with all she had as he buckled the seatbelt across his lap. "Never a dull moment," he shouted over the engine noise, to which Arkanon chose simply to smile rather than try to speak over the rumbling engines. As he looked around, he noted two of the Klingon security detail were fingering the soft cushions curiously. No doubt this sort of creature comfort was strange to them. Those standing were mostly Arkanon's and Alarius' security details. He did not see the Tellerites, who were apparently elsewhere in the spacecraft. There was a poetry to the chaos underlying the scene. Far below them, a fortress that had stood for over two-thousand years against time and wave and weather, was about to be obliterated in a single flash.

CHAPTER 19

Enterprise

The *Enterprise* bridge instantly transformed into a beehive of bustling activity as a security team—a solid as iron and formidable looking young man with at least two inches in height advantage over everyone on the bridge and a slightly shorter but equally as imposing young woman—rushed out of the lift and took up positions on either side of the doors, while several more personnel poured out between them and scattered to their assigned alert stations.

"No!" Captain April shouted in frustration at his comms officer. "Advise the captain of the Klingon flagship that..." He cut himself short and shook his head, suddenly aware that he was yelling at the young officer. He didn't like to yell, especially at his crew. In fact, he had a reputation for being the calmest, most laid-back ship's captain in the fleet. Besides, his physical size alone was enough to intimidate most people...except maybe those two security officers posted by the lift. But the sudden inability to communicate with the other intercepting ships at such a crucial moment frustrated him to say the least, and it was only getting worse. He slammed his fist down on the arm of his chair as he faced forward. "Will somebody please fix the damn universal translator?"

"I am trying, sir!" the comms officer responded, obviously thinking the captain was still shouting directly at him.

April spun his chair back around to face him again as he drew a breath, intending to apologize, but Commander Pike spoke out from the tactical station before he could say a word. "*Starfleet One* is away," his sharp voice shot across the bridge as he stepped down from the outer ring and over to April's side, then added in a lower voice, "There are still over five-hundred delegates still trapped down there.

Several transports have already disboarded and are turning around to pick up more."

"Intruder now at warp two—still accelerating," the helmsman reported. "Estimated planet impact, one minute, twelve seconds."

"That's impossible!" Pike exclaimed. "Check your board! No vessel of that class can make warp two without blowing itself to pieces!"

"Confirm warp two plus, X.O.," the T.O. barked from behind. Then he added, "The lead Klingon squadron just went to warp to intercept."

"Status of security deflector?" April demanded.

"Still engaged," the T.O. shot back.

April threw up his hands and sighed with still growing frustration, knowing that the Klingons were going to blow right past the intruder before they could drop out of warp to engage it. Their officers might have been formidable tacticians when they had time to strategize, but their ships' captains had an innate tendency to act first and think later when emergency situations presented themselves.

"There's just not enough time. That ship is going to rip right through the planet and there's not a damn thing that can be done about it," Pike told April quietly, so as not to be overheard by the others. Then he locked eyes with April as the same thought came to both of them at the same moment, and a silent resolve passed between them.

"Helm officer," April began, "compute present course of that intruder and put us directly between it and the planet!"

April's resolve brought a strange silence to the controlled chaos around the bridge as a number of the crew turned their eyes to him, fearful with the knowledge of what he had in mind. The helmsman turned and looked up at him as though he were looking for reassurance that he had heard his captain correctly.

"You heard the captain," Pike added firmly.

"Aye, sir." The helmsman turned back to his console without another word and entered the commands into his board.

"All hands, secure duty stations and clear the bridge," April ordered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Initiate general order thirteen."

Those who weren't already staring at him turned to him in disbelief.

Pike added loudly for emphasis, "Now!" then went to the communications station and grabbed the earpiece-mike out of the still bewildered comms officer's hand, then reached past him and punched a few controls on the console. "This is the X.O.," he announced, speaking into the device without bothering to put it into his ear. "General order thirteen. Code zulu-one-zulu-six alpha! All hands to evac stations!" He closed the channel, then pushed the T.O. from his seat. "Go!" Pike gave him a shove. There was simply no time for pleasantries. He dropped into the still warm seat and his fingers began dancing across the board as the T.O. looked on briefly before rushing off.

April stepped up beside Pike as the last of the bridge crew were swallowed up by the closing doors of the elevators.

"It's going to be close," Pike said as he turned to his captain.

CHAPTER 20

Farragut

Without George on the communicator updating him on what was happening, Cain felt blind. Doing his best to coordinate the evacuation efforts with Captains Robau and Chavez, whose holographic images still filled the right half of the main viewport, George was burning in the back of his mind. Beaming was still impossible because the security deflector was still up. Coordinating the evacuation was all that he could do, and was, at best, chaos. As soon as a transport would clear the security deflector, everyone on that ship minus the flight crew would be beamed off so their pilots could turn around and go back for more—but they were running out of time. George's last words kept echoing in his mind. He found comfort knowing at least that *Starfleet One* would be landing on *Enterprise*…

"Skipper! *Enterprise* has initiated general order thirteen!" *Farragut's* comms. officer shouted.

"Confirm that!" Cain bellowed.

"Confirmed," the T.O. broke in. "She's launching all her shuttles…"

"What about *Starfleet One*?"

"She's been diverted to *Kelvin*!"

Cain stepped over to the T.O.'s console for a moment, studying the various display as though he were making sure that he was seeing what he thought he was seeing on it. The T.O.'s eyes widened. "Sir, *Enterprise* has maneuvered to a position directly between the intruder and the planet."

Cain spun and squinted at the front viewport to see several dozen escape shuttles flying away en masse from various locations along *Enterprise's* hangar bay. He slammed his fist down on the ship-to-ship again. "*Enterprise*! Bob! What the hell are you doing?"

An image of April sitting at the *Enterprise* helm console coalesced mid-main-viewport just as Pike dropped into the navigator's seat beside him. "I'm venting the ship's plasma and deploying a field of armed photon torpedoes inside the cloud," April advised him. "As soon as that intruder is within range, I'm going to detonate the whole thing. The explosion will collapse his warp field and he'll vaporize before he reaches the planet."

"Bob—" Cain began, not finding any more words before April cut him off.

"I know," April told him. "Take care of my crew. *Enterprise*, signing off."

April vanished from the viewport, preventing further debate.

"Intruder now fifty seconds from planet impact," Cain's helmsman cut in.

CHAPTER 21

Enterprise

The low din of comms traffic jumbled from the console when April's hand calmly muted it. Suddenly there was only the familiar background of the bridge instrumentation, which sounded silent in contrast to everything that was going on around them.

April couldn't remember a time when he'd ever heard a starship bridge so peaceful and quiet outside of space dock before.

"Photon deployment computed," Pike reported. "All torpedoes set for simultaneous manual detonation."

"Fire all torpedoes," April returned evenly.

"Firing starboard and port launchers," Pike pressed a single torpedo launch control button. The lights flickered momentarily from the E-M suppression burst as the sound of the launchers activating echoed through the deck plates. "Primary launcher, fire." He pressed it again, followed by another flicker and echo. "All torpedoes deployed, Captain."

April finished making minor adjustments to several controls. "Venting plasma in three, two, one—"

April's finger jammed on a console display and a deep, hollow sound reverberated through the bulkheads and two vaporous streams of plasma erupted into view from each bottom corner of the main viewport, spreading rapidly through the space ahead of them.

"All plasma vented," he announced with resignation as he reached toward one more instrument control. "Jettisoning warp core." He pressed the button, then leaned back slightly and let his hands drop into his lap. He and Pike both gazed out through the front viewport in resumed silence for several moments. Then, finally, he turned to his X.O.—to his friend—and told him, "It's time for you to go, Chris."

"Respectfully, sir, I decline," Pike replied matter-of-factly.

"It wasn't a request, Commander."

"Yes, sir, I understand, but if something happens to you, there will be nobody to manually fire the phasers."

April knew that his exec's logic was sound. It always was. He returned his friend's smile, and after a few more moments of silence, said, "Arm phasers, Mister Pike."

CHAPTER 22

Farragut

Still standing beside his command chair, Cain had just watched the dozen or so photon torpedoes scatter en masse from *Enterprise's* various launch stations into the glimmering iridescent ever expanding cloud that was the vented plasma.

What was about to happen had never been done before. It had always been taught as a defensive tactic at Starfleet Academy as a last resort solution—when the supreme sacrifice was called for. It was in fact invented by a young cadet named Garth. Garth was a contemporary of the new breed emerging from the Academy alongside George Kirk, Bob April and himself.

Just before the First War with the Klingons, Garth, like every other cadet, faced the dreaded *Kobayashi Maru* and decided to employ this tactic to save the doomed *Kobayashi Maru*. The solution was so unique, unprecedented, ingenious and elegant, because instead of choosing any number of aggressive scenarios to defeat the Klingons, Garth had chosen sacrifice, which was so contrary to the nature of the brash young cadet, that it captivated the collective Starfleet brass. They fast-tracked Garth to Kelvin and Robau quickly pushed him ahead to his first and last command during the famous Battle of Axanar. Everyone, including George himself, readily admitted that had things turned out differently for Garth, he would likely be the most decorated Starfleet officer in the history of the service, not George. Garth's intellect and pure innate tactical skill was so far above anything ever before witnessed, the stars were the limit. But fate intervened and Garth became a legendary footnote.

Cain felt a twinge of guilt for being glad George wasn't on *Enterprise*. But his friend had done enough for king and country.

As the plasma cloud continued to expand and began to dissipate, portions of it shifted through the full prism of color as cosmic particles of dust and debris sailed through it on solar winds. So beautiful, and yet so deadly.

"Skipper, *Archer* and *Kelvin* report they've landed all the delegates from the surface. They're just waiting on the *Starfleet One*."

"What?" This bad news came unexpected and hard to Cain's ears. "What the hell's taking them so long?"

"Unknown," came the response from comms.

"How long until they clear the deflector?"

"Thirty-seven seconds."

Cain smashed his finger on the ship-to-ship without even looking. "Cain to Captains, *Archer* and *Kelvin*. Move off to a safe distance. We'll hang close and wait for *Starfleet One*." Cain turned to his comms officer as he switched the channel. "Transporter room, stand by to beam everybody off *Starfleet One* the moment they're clear of the deflector!" He spun to his comms officer again. "Advise *Starfleet One* to stand by for emergency transporter evac. Helm, as soon as they're onboard, raise our shields and get us out of here!"

"Aye, Captain," the helm officer came back. Then, speaking into his own console, he ordered, "All decks, stand by for emergency warp."

"Planet impact in twenty-seconds!" shouted the T.O.

"Sir, I've lost contact with *Starfleet One*! I've tried to raise them! No response!"

Cain spun on his comms officer.

CHAPTER 23

Enterprise

"Time to intercept, thirty seconds," Pike reported calmly to April, who gazed out through the viewport just as calmly.

"They really need to serve better food in the galley," April offered in a deadpan tone after a few moments, as he turned to face his exec.

"It is pretty lousy," Pike agreed just as flatly, though with the slightest of smiles. "I'll bring it up in my next report."

"I can hear Cain now," April smiled, mimicking Cain's rasp and shaking his head slightly, he said, "Why do I always have to be right?" Then, noting an indicator on the console, he said, "Phasers charged."

"Ten seconds," Pike announced quietly without prompting.

"Chris," April said, smiling at his X.O. "It's been an honor."

Pike gazed back at his longtime commanding officer. "Honor's been mine, sir." His eyes shifted slightly to the console.

April reached out and flipped up the safety cover to the phaser fire controls. "Firing in five seconds...four...three…" His index finger hovered barely an inch over the button…

CHAPTER 24

Farragut

A deluge of brilliant green-white light poured into the bridge faster than the viewport could polarize against it, temporarily blinding everyone. It subsided quickly when the viewport finally went black, but several more seconds passed before anyone could begin to see anything again. As soon as he could see well enough to focus on his instrument readouts, the tactical officer studied his short-range sensor display for a few seconds, then shouted, "They blew up!"

"Yes, I can see that, Lieutenant," Cain rasped back, greatly annoyed. He'd just lost an old and dear friend, and his tactical officer had apparently thought nothing of twisting the knife and pouring salt in the wound.

"No, Skipper!" the lieutenant clarified as he faced around to meet Cain's glaring eyes. "I mean the intruder! He's gone! He blew up well short of the torpedo field!"

Cain slammed his fist down on the ship-to-ship on his chair arm. "Cain to Enterprise!"

"Still here, Farragut," April's fairly calm voice came back.

Cain heaved a great sigh of relief and then practically leapt from his seat to the tactical station. "What happened? Why did he blow up?" he pounded the T.O. with his words.

"I...I don't know, sir," the T.O. answered, bewildered. "One second he was there and then BOOM! He was gone."

Cain stepped over to the communications station. "Get me *Starfleet One*!" he bellowed.

"I still can't raise it," the comms officer replied anxiously.

"Have they cleared that damn security field yet?"

"I...I don't know," came the T.O.'s hesitant response.

"What?" Cain thundered back.

"They seem to have landed on the surface, but I can't get an accurate reading."

"Incoming comms," the comms officer broke in. He pressed his finger to his earpiece and listened for a moment, then reported, "One of the other Klingon shuttles is reporting an explosion aboard *Starfleet One*. They were flying together and—" He listened even more intently as Cain almost came out of his skin with anxiety. "They went down, Skipper! *Starfleet One* is down on the surface! I get conflicting reports of emergency and crash landing—"

"Oh no—" Cain muttered then he dashed toward the elevator…

CHAPTER 25

Rigel VII

The first thing Cain saw as the twilight world coalesced around him and the transporter beam released him on the surface of Rigel VII was a long, wide trench furrowed in the ground not ten feet in front of him—a smoking, blackened gash like a deep, open wound in the planet's flesh. The second thing he saw, rather heard and felt right to his bones, was the near deafening roar of dozens of shuttlecraft and transport thrusters firing without purpose behind him, their pilots, crews, and passengers having been hastily beamed up to the safety of the starships in orbit while their craft landed on autopilot.

He spun around to find a horrible scene playing itself out before him. At the far end of the trench, surrounded by at least half a dozen heavily damaged landing shuttles, the twisted wreckage of *Starfleet One* angled nose-down and half-buried in the ground, fully engulfed in bright orange flames that flickered and danced several meters high and spewed their thick, black smoke and glowing sparks into the night sky.

He dashed madly forward, racing toward the wreckage, where he could see several figures standing around, huddled more or less together, silhouetted by the blazing inferno behind them. As he stumbled closer, he realized that they were all looking down at two others, one kneeling over the other, who lay flat on his back. "George!" he shouted out as he drew closer to them.

He reached them and found himself standing next to Minister Gorkon and several of his aides, most of whom appeared to be injured to one extent or another. The man on his knees was Doctor Boyce, bloodied and dirtied, covered in ash, administering whatever medical aid he could to an apparently lifeless Arkanon at an

almost frantic pace. He raised his eyes to Gorkon. "Where's Kirk?" he demanded. He could feel the fire's intense heat on his face now, he was so close to it. But Gorkon, watching intently while Boyce tried valiantly to save his mentor's life, didn't respond. "George Kirk!" Cain shouted more urgently. "Where's George Kirk?"

Gorkon turned his gaze on Cain but didn't say anything. But then his eyes shifted in the direction of the burning shipwreck, and that was all Cain needed to understand. He ran toward the wreckage, but before he drew much closer it exploded, and the shockwave threw him backward to the ground, knocking the wind out of him.

Recovering quickly, he slowly rose to his feet again, but he knew immediately...there was no chance that anyone left onboard was still alive. Not after that.

The flames danced in his eyes as he realized that he'd broken his promise to Winona. He'd told her that he'd bring George home safe and sound. He'd failed. George Kirk, his closest friend, was gone.

CHAPTER 26

Gettysburg

It was one of those 'perfect' days. The soupy humidity of the sweltering summer had given way to the cool dry promise of fall, bringing with it a cloudless crystal clear blue sky. A gentle October breeze kicked up, rustling the leaves around him, some of which were just beginning to show the first tinges of their Autumn colors to come. He watched as one of them freed itself from a branch and a last flight of glory, tumbled away to the ground far below.

As he had nearly every day since his father left, James sat balanced atop his favorite branch of the old oak tree, with his back resting against the trunk and his nose buried in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The left side of the book was heavier on his left leg than the right side was on his right, as he had made good progress into it. It wasn't easy reading, but as he'd reminded himself more than a few times already, he'd promised his father he'd be finished with it by the time he returned.

An errant twig danced back and forth in front of his face in the gentle breeze. He looked up. It was just a twig. Annie wasn't there today but their magical kiss still wafted on the gentle breeze rustling the leaves.

She might show up shortly. She'd had to help her father do something in the morning and would try to make it. He wanted to hear the familiar rubbing and crunching of the branches and twigs below as she climbed up to join him. How his life had changed in the few months since he'd faced down the tornado that had uprooted and displaced his family.

He balanced his book in his lap and pushed the binoculars Cain had given him out of the way. He hardly ever went anywhere without them hanging from around

his neck anymore. He pulled the sleeves of his thick, oversized black Iowa Hawkeyes sweatshirt down past his wrists and over his knuckles. Very strange, this Pennsylvania weather. He couldn't remember it ever being so cool in October before. Not back in Iowa anyway. It wasn't cold, exactly, but it was definitely cooler than usual for the time of year. Good football weather, he realized as he looked down at the large embroidered yellow logo that dominated the front of his sweatshirt, pressing his chin firmly into its top edge.

Something moved, in the distance beyond the leaves and branches. Something down on the ground, beyond the barn. James glanced straight down at the base of the tree—Blackie, who had been laying there waiting for him to climb back down, was sitting up and alert.

James looked up through the branches again, craning his neck to see through the leaves. There—two figures were walking up the path to the house, passing by the barn. He recognized that familiar purposeful gait—was it? It was Cain! He still couldn't see who the other one was, but if Cain had come, then it had to be—

"Dad!"

James slammed his book shut and barely avoided falling as he left his knapsack hanging on its branch and scrambled book-in-hand down the tree with excitement. He let the big book drop as he needed both hands to swing down from the last low branch. His feet landed with a crunch in the leaves collected on the ground next to where *A Tale of Two Cities* had fallen, prompting Blackie to jump to his feet. He started running, remembered, turned back and grabbed the big book, spun and almost fell on his face when he slipped on some fallen leaves, and sprinted off toward the house with Blackie hot on his heels, mouth wide open with his tongue flapping out the side. "Dad!" he shouted again as he ran. "Dad! Dad!"

He skidded to a sudden stop just a few yards short of the porch steps—Blackie stopped, too, looking up at him, then at the porch, then back. James realized for the first time that his father wasn't there after all. Cain was there—he'd been right about that—but it was some other Starfleet officer he'd seen walking with Cain—a man James had never seen before—wearing a solemn look on his face and a strange Starfleet dress uniform he'd never seen before. There were no decorations.

Then he looked to the porch. Holding his mother in his sinewy arms was Grandpa Ty. She was crying uncontrollably, holding onto him with failing strength. All the holding was being done by Grandpa Ty and his oak-like arms, which were all that kept her from slipping to her knees as she sobbed uncontrollably.

Ty caught James' eyes, and he saw in his grandfather's eyes something he'd never seen before. Sadness and anger.

James' gaze shifted to Cain, whose face had a similar sadness on his face. He seemed lost and helpless as he stood on the porch a few steps away from Ty and his mother.

He dropped *A Tale of Two Cities* and it hit with a thud on the ground. It fell open and the breeze began turning the pages, one by one with loud, snapping sounds, faster and faster.

He felt a pressure in his chest like nothing he'd ever felt before as he suddenly found it difficult to breathe. Everyone but his father was there—and he knew why. The reality around him seemed to grow larger and colder while he began to feel small and vulnerable, like the entire universe was suddenly abandoning him. He felt dizzy and everything seemed to echo.

A sudden brisk, chilly wind blew around him. Dry brown leaves scratched the ground as they blew across the yard, swirling around his feet. He began to breathe short and fast.

"Come here, James," he heard Cain's voice echo.

He saw Cain stepping off the porch stairs and toward him. He backed up, his right heel catching the corner of the book he'd dropped.

"James—" Cain kept walking toward him as he opened both arms wider.

"No." James didn't say it but felt it. His lips were as dry and cracked as the leaves that swirled about his feet. He kept backing away from Cain. He couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't let Cain get to him. If he did it would be real. He spun and with a tremendous push from his right foot, sprinted away down the

path toward the barn. All he could hear was his breathing and the pounding in his ears.

"Jim!"

Suddenly there was Annie, running toward him from down the path. She stopped in her tracks in the open wooden gate beside the barn and looked at him. Her brilliant aquamarine eyes were sad and pooled with tears. James couldn't take it. He bolted right past her as she spun to watch him racing off down the dirt path, her golden blond bangs blowing about her face. Blackie, who had been chasing after him, stopped several feet beyond the gate and turned around to look back, then came over to Annie. She bent down to put her arms around the dog, and both watched as James ran farther and farther away toward the distant rolling hills of Pennsylvania.

James burst into the rolling waves of tall grass on the hillside. He could feel his heart pounding and his throat burning as he ran up the slope, cutting through the undulating grass. As he drew nearer to the top of the sprawling hill, his legs began to fail him. His thighs and calves burned and quivered until he finally collapsed to his knees at the top of the hill—alone. He looked up to the sky, tears streaming down his face…

CHAPTER 27

Farragut

His father was gone. Kalor Arkanon, the chancellor of the Klingon Empire was gone. The Federation President was gone.

James tugged at the front of his way too tight shirt collar as he tried to imagine just what had happened. The Federation blamed the Klingons and the Klingons blamed the Federation—and just like that, a peace summit caused a war. Specifically the Klingons blamed his father for Arkanon's death—even though he died with him in that fiery explosion. It was confusing.

He looked around the *Farragut's* massive hanger deck once again as soft piano music continued to play over unseen speakers. A real piano had been set up in an out of the way corner, James had noticed when he and his family first came onto the deck.

The section that had been set aside was small and intimate in comparison to the vastness of the hanger bay. A rectangular section of cobalt blue carpet covered the bare floor of the deck near the several stories high bay entrance, beyond which hung the blue and white horizon of Earth, and the Moon above, seemingly resting upon its ocean of air.

Facing this spectacular vista, a dozen or so rows of chairs were arranged in two sections on the blue carpet in front of a podium. All combined, he, his mother and Sam, and the various aunts, uncles, and cousins from both sides of the family who'd made the trip filled nearly the entire front row of chairs.

James' gaze drifted to the front of the podium directly facing their seats, where a large wreath of white lilies rested on a black, three-legged stand, with the famil-

iar blue flag of the *United Federation of Planets* draped carefully below it, spread just wide enough to be recognizable. His father's ashes were somewhere beneath in a small polished metal container of some design he'd seen only once when his mother had been making a choice between it and another. Oblong and about the size of a football, it was rectangular with rounded corners. He'd noticed that it also had on it, deeply engraved in a brilliant inlaid golden foil, the emblem of the *United Federation of Planets*, beneath which would apparently now appear, from what he overheard that day, in the same inlaid gold, his father's full name in a bold formal font, George Samuel Kirk.

Directly to the right of the rows of chairs, a large crowd of very somber looking Starfleet personnel in their gold and blue dress uniforms had gathered together and were milling about, talking in whispers amongst themselves.

His grandfather was suspiciously absent. Tiberius had been out riding a couple days back when Admiral uncharacteristically bolted. Grandpa Ty was de-saddled by a low lying branch that struck him in the head. Only when Admiral wandered back to the barn alone, did it become evident he'd gone missing. The injuries he'd sustained had been more severe than first thought, and for days now, he had been hospitalized. What had not been known immediately at the time, was that the impact of the branch and the fall following was not the whole story. He'd had a heart condition for some time, which he'd kept to himself. Had somebody gotten to him sooner, perhaps things could have turned out differently. In the last few days James had watched the strapping giant of a man become a mere shadow of his former self; unable to speak or communicate in any fashion whatsoever. He just seemed to stare blankly for hours on end, into an abyss only he could see. His mother said that his heart had broken from learning that his only remaining son was gone, and that he'd outlived his entire family and it was just too much for him to bear.

James thought back to the days spent playing Star Trek with Gary and Annie. They'd never played out this particular scenario before. Death had been a glorious and frequently overacted performance—especially in Gary's case—but then whoever had died would simply be recast into a new role.

There would be no recasting here. The vast hollow vacuum left inside him by his father's absence seemed to be mirrored by the vastness of the hanger bay itself and somehow made him feel both tiny and huge at the same time. And for some reason he couldn't understand, he felt as if every physical sense he possessed had suddenly been heightened to the max. He could see the brilliance of the myriad of colors around him. He could hear every muffled cough and shuffle of feet, not to mention his own breathing. He could smell everything—from the lilies in his father's wreath to the cleaning solvents used on the deck. And he could feel every slight brush of circulated air on the back of his neck and the textures of his clothing against his skin.

He could feel the tears about to come and he chased them away by looking around once more at those assembled. He recognized a few faces from the last Family Day, the day set aside for family members to visit the ship whenever it came home to port—a tradition that went back several hundred years to the navies of Earth's oceans.

He let his gaze linger a moment on his uncle Frank, who was sitting next to his mother, between her and Sam. Well not his real uncle but a friend of his father's who'd visited them in Iowa a few years back. "Uncle" Frank was a friend of his mother's whom she had known since grade school. Frank showed up after his grandfather's accident and was helping his mother cope with the aftermath. He seemed lost in his own world as he stared transfixed at his own shoes.

Sam didn't like uncle Frank at all, and apparently the feeling was mutual. Cain didn't like him either, come to think of it, but the two men had apparently never met, by chance or by choice, until recently. And while Cain was his father's best friend, the call of duty kept him preoccupied, and so in recent days it was Frank at his mother's side constantly, and while he had no opinion about Frank one way or another, Frank had little to say to him either. Maybe he didn't like him? The one thing he did remember vividly was that uncle Frank liked to drink and to swear, and not in that particular order, and while he only had that one visit upon which to draw conclusions, apparently Frank often dropped in unannounced and frequently overstayed his welcome. "You look like your father," were the only words he said to him as he stood in the doorway looking down at him after his mother

told him to get the door. Then he might as well have not existed at all because Frank gave him very little if any notice whatsoever.

Sam, uncharacteristically, had stopped teasing him recently, and the brothers had turned a new page in their relationship. Sam's kindness felt sincere but strange. James suddenly realized that all that was left of his immediate family was he, Sam and their mother. That's it. He felt a strange, anxious quickening in his pulse as that realization swept over him.

He could really have used Annie's company right now. She knew what it was like to lose a parent. He felt guilty for a moment because he knew that wasn't the only reason he wished she was there. Why was he even thinking about her at a time like this?

He started to study the heavily decorated dress uniforms. There must have been more than two hundred people attending, and from what James could see, those in uniform, with the exception of the VIPs, were all wearing the Farragut's emblem on their chest.

The piano music fell silent and Cain appeared at the front of the crowd standing off to the right, attired as they were in his flawless Starfleet dress uniform. He stood at attention facing the ship's personnel and ordered them to, "Fall in." His voice had that edge of command that James had so often heard in his father's, but there was also a certain quiet sensitivity to it that perfectly befitted the ceremony.

In a quiet hush and shuffle of footsteps, the attendees who had not yet sat down found chairs. Meanwhile a contingent of Farragut's crew fell into a formation of perfectly aligned rows and columns of personnel, all standing silently at attention just to the left side of the carpeted area, facing their skipper, Cain, who waited for a few moments, then commanded, "Pa-rade, REST." In one simultaneous motion, as if they were all part of one body, the entire crew, except for Cain, spread their feet apart and folded their hands behind their backs. The discipline behind their movements was extraordinary, and James couldn't help but allow the pride he felt in his father to well up behind his sorrow. All of this was new to him. Once again he felt a surge of emotions swell inside him. If only he were a Vulcan, he wouldn't have to deal with them.

Cain executed an about-face and his eyes briefly found James'. But rather than allowing his gaze to linger, he continued his movement uninterrupted and assumed the same position as his crew and stood silent, maintaining his stoic expression.

An elderly gentleman in command gold got up from his place in the row of chairs near the back of the makeshift stage and moved behind the podium. "Good morning," he began. "First I'd like to welcome our visitors aboard. Secondly, but most important, to express on behalf of all Starfleet, our heartfelt condolences to the family of George Samuel Kirk. We have come to this place today to celebrate a life—a life of a man whom I've had the distinct honor to serve with for more than a decade, and more personally, a friend—a friend I shall sorely miss."

James' attention began to drift off as the man went on about his years serving with his father. He'd never seen him before.

After several long minutes, the man finally concluded his speech by thanking everyone for listening. But it was what he said next that really caught James' attention.

"And now it is my pleasure to introduce to you Admiral Eiseley, the C-n-C."

The C-n-C?, James marveled. The commanding admiral of the entire Starfleet? His father must have been a lot more important that he'd thought for the top commander to be there. James' pride swelled even more as the admiral stood up and took the other man's place behind the podium, and this time he listened intently to every word.

"Captain George Samuel Kirk was one of the finest individuals I have ever known," the admiral began. "He was a man of great character, honest and trustworthy. Unwaveringly loyal to the very end, and because his wisdom and service were irreplaceable, and he answered the call once more."

The C-n-C paused and looked out over the sea of faces before him for a moment, then continued. ""Those are just words', as George would often say. But he always finished that thought, saying, 'but they are good words.' And he lived them every day."

James' wandering gaze fell on a woman dressed in an admiral's uniform seated among the VIPs, though with a second look he realized that her features were angular and serious, her eyebrows arched, and her ears were—she was a Vulcan! A real live Vulcan, right there in the same room with him! Had she been a friend of his father's, too? Would she speak? What would she sound like?

Her uniform was different than those the other Starfleet brass were wearing as well. Similar, yes, but deep sapphire blue instead of the dark mustard gold, and in addition to the normal pins and patches, she wore a medallion around her neck—some sort of emblem he had never seen before. A bronze triangle cutting into the lower right side of a silver circle, with some kind of crystal in the center. Probably something from Vulcan, and of great significance.

It suddenly occurred to him that in addition to looking very regal, the woman was also strikingly beautiful.

Her eyes suddenly shifted and locked with his, almost as if she'd heard his thoughts. He quickly looked away. Had he been staring at her that long? Had she sensed his gaze? Assuming the rumors he'd heard about Vulcan mental abilities were true, did she know that he thought she was beautiful?

Why was he thinking these things? He turned his attention back to the C-n-C.

"Captain George Samuel Kirk was…is...everything we look for in those rare few who rise to command a starship. And while we have lost his physical presence, he is here with us in spirit, embodied in those of us who loved him—his family, his friends, and those who had the honor to serve with him, forever. He was a hero—" His voice cracked, ever so slightly, and he paused. But clearly he was not going to leave his last words unsaid. "He was my hero," he managed, forcing himself to control his emotions. Then he finished with a simple nod, then silence.

James' eyes were riveted to the man's face. The man who commanded the entire Starfleet. The man who'd apparently known his father very well. Who was he?

The music quietly resumed as the C-n-C returned to his seat, played on for a few moments, and then trailed off into silence. Then another of the VIPs stood up and made his way to the podium. James recognized him instantly, having met him

once a couple years ago. He actually did stop by to visit them in Iowa—the legendary Captain Robau of the *Kelvin*. His father had served as first officer under Robau before transferring to and eventually taking command of *Farragut*. In fact, according to stories he'd heard told over the years between Cain and his father, Robau himself had held vigil over his mother in *Kelvin's* sickbay during her most severe bout with false labor whenever his father wasn't able to.

Robau started by talking about his days serving with his father, just like the first man had done. He talked about what an exceptional X.O. he had been and how proud he had been to serve with him and call him friend, about how he'd always respected him and had encouraged his junior officers to strive to be like him. Nice words, and James could hear the sincerity in them, but it still didn't take him very long to lose interest in what he was saying too. His eyes fell on the Vulcan officer again, but this time he didn't allow his gaze to linger long enough to draw her attention.

In his daydreaming, he missed entirely Captain Robau's closing and noticed he was already returning to his seat. Had he missed anything?

Cain stood and stepped forward again behind the podium. In a snappy but muted tone, he called the crew formation to attention again, and then began to call out their names, one by one. James knew what was happening, and for the first time since he'd taken his seat he truly feared that he might break down and cry. His father's final roll call.

With each name, called in slow and steady cadence, someone responded with a clear, sharp, "Aye, sir." The roll-call went on for what seemed to James almost like forever. But then, suddenly, everything changed.

"Captain Kirk," Cain called out again. No one answered, of course. "Captain Kirk," he repeated. Again, there was no answer. "Captain George Samuel Kirk," he called out once more, his voice cracking slightly under the weight of the name.

James looked this way and that, and found people silently crying all around him, but he resisted the overwhelming drive to join them with all that he had. Boys weren't supposed to cry and he was determined not to, even as pools of tears welled up in his eyes.

Cain came to attention.

Another *Farragut* crewman stepped forward—the Boson's Mate. He raised his boson's whistle sharply to his lips and piped a high-pitched call that James recognized as the one sounded whenever a Captain officially departed his ship. Then he lowered the whistle with equal precision and stood at attention. And then there was silence—absolutely no sound whatsoever. And for the next few moments, nothing happened. No one spoke. No music played. Nothing.

And then there was a sound unlike any other sound James had ever heard, and it seemed to echo throughout the entire hanger bay. Bagpipes. Beginning with a lilting single, long, steady note, the bagpiper finally began to render the centuries-old *Amazing Grace* so smoothly that James couldn't be sure exactly where the transition had occurred. As he listened, he realized that unlike the earlier piano music, this music was coming from one definite direction. Behind them.

He turned around in his seat and craned his neck to see all the way to the back—actually, the front, he remembered—of the hanger deck, but he couldn't see very well past the people sitting behind him. He was just about to give up and face forward again when he saw the bagpiper marching slowly forward, making his way methodically between the rows of chairs and the crew formation as he approached the wreath. He was a young man with short, dark hair, probably about Sam's age, dressed in the same kind of cadet's dress tunic that Sam was wearing. But instead of the standard charcoal-colored trousers, he wore a traditional Scottish kilt in a red plaid design, complete with some kind of matching sash that hung over one of his shoulders, white knee socks with little pieces of the same tartan cloth fastened to them, and a pair of shoes like nothing he had ever seen.

The bagpipe player paused in front of the wreath, but continued to play while Cain and Robau came forward again. Flanking each side of the wreath, they picked up the Federation flag and folded it in a very precise and reverent fashion, revealing the polished black rectangular container with the golden Starfleet logo inlaid. Cain and Robau each placed their hands on the folded banner in some practiced fashion, and then Robau relinquished it to Cain, who kept it pressed horizontally between his open hands, briefly inspecting it.

And then, suddenly, the bagpiper stopped playing. Cain and Robau turned to face the guests, standing silently at attention. The entire deck remained silent while Cain carried the folded flag in front of him, cradled in both hands, and approached his mother. He bowed forward at the waist, and as he presented the flag to her, he leaned in closer and said something to her so quietly that James couldn't hear. He strained to listen, but the only words he could make out were, "grateful Federation." His mother accepted the flag with tears streaming down her cheeks and bowed her head. But then, in a surprising gesture that must have taken all the emotional strength she had left—a gesture that was "all her", his father would have said—she reached out through her grief, rested her hand on Cain's forearm, and locked her tearful gaze with him. He saw Cain's eyes glisten as he set his jaw firmly before putting his own hand over hers, taking it from his shoulder to hold for a few moments before gently laying it in her lap. With a sideways glance he locked eyes first with Sam, and then with him. He gazed one last time at his mother, for one more brief moment, then stood up and returned to his place in front of the formation.

"Honor Guard," Robau called out. "Post!"

From somewhere behind the seats, the simultaneous stomp of several booted feet against the deck echoed through the bay. James turned around in his chair once again and he quickly spotted what could only have been the Honor Guard that Robau had just told to post, marching forward between the seats and the crew formation just as the bagpiper had done, but this time to the slow, steady beat of a single drum. The three men in front each carried a flag supported in a sort of cup fastened to the bases of the shiny black harnesses they wore over their shoulders. He easily recognized both the Federation flag in the center and the Starfleet flag to its right, but couldn't make out what the third one was. The ship's own flag, perhaps? What was it called? The guidon? The ship's colors?

Seven more officers followed behind the flag bearers, each carrying antique long barrel firearms—rifles—from some time in the distant past when weapons fired with gunpowder. James marveled. They looked a lot like the ones he'd seen on display in the museum in Gettysburg, but unlike the museum pieces that had shown centuries of wear and corrosion, these ones looked to be in mint condition.

As the Honor Guard continued to march forward with deliberate slowness, hesitating with each step before their highly shined boots finally hit the deck as one with a forceful thump, James noticed that while their uniforms were basically the same dress uniforms that all the other Starfleet personnel were wearing, they were perfect. There were no wrinkles, no sags in fabric, no imperfection of any kind. The only other thing he could remember ever seeing performed to the same level of perfection was the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery when he visited several years ago on a school trip.

His eyes remained fixed on them as they marched. Those with the flags stopped in front of the wreath, while those with the rifles turned to the left, marched across the rows of chairs so close to him that he could have reached out and touched them, then turned to the right and continued on toward the open hanger doors. James's heart ached with pride. All of this was being done for to his father. He pressed his teeth together hard to ward off the tears.

The rifle squad adjusted their firearms in snappy unison as they passed by the container with his father's ashes, doing an "eyes on" sharp turn of their heads to gaze momentarily on it before just as snappily returning their distant gaze forward toward the open bay doors and the sweeping Earth vista beyond.

When the squad reached the edge of the deck, they spread themselves out in a single row, facing open space. As if on cue, the brilliantly gleaming sun began to rise above the horizon of mother Earth's bright blue blanket of air beyond them.

Cain and Robau had resumed opposite flanking positions beside his father's container, facing it, and then both reached in to adjust two small controls on the small bier, which then lifted to hover off the platform, carefully held by Cain and Robau before both relinquished their hold on it. The panels on the bier flashed briefly a red, then a green on the indicator lights before it began to float away toward the open hanger doors, slowly but deliberately.

"Half right…FACE!" one of the rifle squad shouted. All seven of them immediately and very crisply turned forty-five degrees to their right. "Present…ARMS!" the leader then shouted. The seven grabbed their rifles away from their shoulders

and held them vertically directly in front of them, while the flag-bearers dipped their colors forward.

"Present…ARMS!" the voice echoed again, at which time he and the formation of Starfleet personnel behind him all rendered an old-fashioned salute—something James' dad had once told him was an old custom that the space service didn't use anymore, except in the most formal of ceremonies. Somehow, that made it all the more meaningful.

Robau did an about face and saluted as well, as did all the VIP brass except for the Vulcan officer, who simply stood at attention.

"Ready!" the lead rifleman shouted. The seven shifted their rifles to port arms, holding them diagonally across their bodies, and charged the old-fashioned manual bolts.

"Aim!" The seven raised their rifles, stocks to shoulders, and aimed them out into space in perfect unison as the floating bier with his father's ashes began to elevate as it made its way automatically toward and above them.

"FIRE!"

CRACK! went the seven rifles, firing as one. And then, with such precision as James had never seen before, the riflemen snapped back to the port arms position again.

They did this twice more—twenty-one total shots—and then returned to the present arms position. Afterwards, from somewhere that somehow sounded very far off, a lone trumpeter began to play a solemn wailing of Taps as the bier with his father's ashes passed them overhead, finally crossing the threshold of the hanger and out over the magnificent and blinding sunrise. Obviously great care was being exercised on the bridge to position the vessel just right to allow for the spectacular event.

As the music finally drew to a close with a last lingering, slowly fading tone, James looked over at Cain and caught a glimpse of tears in the man's eyes.

"Order…ARMS," Robau commanded. At once, Cain and the crew in formation dropped their salutes. But the riflemen, James noticed, remained at present arms.

Suddenly, beyond the open hanger doors, five Starfleet starfighters swooshed into view out of nowhere, flying in a 'V' formation right toward the hanger bay. A distance short of the hanger doors, one of them peeled off and soared away on its own, leaving the formation incomplete as it sailed over and out of view.

James caught sight of his mother crying and caught a glimpse of Sam wiping tears from his eyes as well—but there was also anger on Sam's face as he glared ahead into the distance.

Some of the officers and crew in the formation were crying, too. James loved his father dearly and was as sad as any of them. Probably a lot sadder. But he was not going to cry—not this time.

As the riflemen rejoined the flag bearers and the entire Honor Guard began its slow march back down the center of the bay, James Tiberius Kirk stood up, alone, took a single step forward, and raised his hand in a salute.

CHAPTER 28

Farragut
(Fifteen-years later)

The knuckles of his right arm were flushed white as he gripped the left arm of the empty center seat, alternating between pushing and pulling to stand fast as the floor of the bridge bucked and yawed below his feet. Twenty-five year old Commander James Tiberius Kirk, *Farragut's* acting captain since the catastrophe at Tycho IV, clenched his jaw as the bridge suddenly heaved upward.

The helm officer was nearly at fisticuffs with the helm console, fighting the massive and incredibly powerful gravitic tides that were rolling in like gigantic rogue waves from the typhoon-like black hole that was grappling with its starship prey, pulling it relentlessly toward its event horizon from one side.

Meanwhile the Klingon captain of the D7 had apparently decided today was a good day to die. Just minutes earlier, while maneuvering Farragut treacherously close to the outer bands of the black hole in order to begin a series of scientific experiments, the Klingon warship had swooped in on them from behind and taken them completely by surprise. Metaphorically speaking, as his good friend Leonard McCoy often expressed himself, he was between the proverbial rock and a hard place. How the Klingons had managed to surprise him, he had no idea, but he'd quickly made a mental note of it under 'never let that happen again'—if there was a never again.

He felt oddly privileged in the face of certain death. As far as he knew, he was the very first to encounter the newest, most heavily armed and powerful addition to an increasingly menacing Klingon Imperial Fleet. The Federation hadn't heard much from the Romulans since the war nearly a century ago, but the prevailing theory in the halls of Starfleet was that the Romulans were utilizing the Klingons

as a proxy against the Federation, following their version of the ancient Earth proverb 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' How the Klingons viewed it was a mystery, but they readily inhabited the role and were evidently now deploying the new warship. While no-one to this day had actually seen one of the warships, its lines were distinctly Klingon and reminiscent of the old D-6, but much larger and more elegant. Its weapons were certainly more powerful than the D-6. He could now attest to that.

But what were the Klingons even doing here in the first place? They certainly weren't interested in the black hole or any science behind it, and there was nothing for parsecs in any direction. Had they been stalking him? That would be the ultimate embarrassment.

On the screen, the stingray-like warship swept back into view, spun about and literally rode an incoming gravitic wave like a surfer and bore down on them once more. That captain was relentless—willing to grapple with Farragut to their mutual deaths. It was annoying.

"Forward phasers, target that torpedo bank and FIRE!" Kirk ordered over the chaotic din as he regained his balance.

"Firing forward phasers, aye!" Lieutenant Commander Kelly LeBlanc shouted from the tactical operations station off to his right just as the torpedo launcher of the D-6 began to glow a bright blood red. LeBlanc jammed her finger on her console and twin phaser beams lashed out from *Farragut* like a pair of sapphire sabers, grazing the D-6's starboard shields, and it yawed and rolled out of view beyond the screen's right edge.

"They're going for our flank, Skipper!" Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell yelled as he spun away from Tactical Ops, where he'd been standing over LeBlanc like an Academy instructor analyzing a student's practical exercise performance.

"Aux power to shields, all starboard!" Kirk shouted.

"Aux power to shields, all starboard, aye!" LeBlanc confirmed as her fingers pounced on several controls, bumping Mitchell's hip with her elbow as she reached past him.

"Starboard phasers, FIRE!" Kirk barked.

"Starboard phasers, aye!" LeBlanc confirmed once more as she stabbed her fingers down on the fire controls. The phasers' muffled whine echoed through the bridge once more. "Direct hit amidship—"

Farragut suddenly shuddered and heaved violently under a thunderous barrage of torpedoes, throwing Mitchell and some of the crew from their stations around the bridge's outer ring hard to the deck. Several consoles snapped and crackled, spitting sparks like bright golden fireworks into the air. Some of them burst into yellow-blue flames, and acrid blue-white smoke thick with the smell of ozone began to fill the air.

"She's powering up disruptor arrays again!" Mitchell warned, already back on his feet at Tac-Ops while the others were just scrambling back to their posts.

"Helm, five-seven degrees to starboard!" Kirk ordered. "Full power to forward shields!"

"Five-seven degrees starboard, aye!" the helmsman confirmed. But a sudden and violent impact pitched the bridge and hurled him backwards from his chair before he could comply with the order. Kirk tried to grab him, but it was all he could do to hold onto the center seat and avoid flying backwards himself. The helmsman landed with a hard thud and struck his head on the center seat's pedestal.

There was no time to tend to the injured helm officer. Kirk hurled himself at the helm station, grabbing the helm chair seat back as Gary leaped over the safety rail and landed in it.

"Answering five seven degrees starboard, Skipper," he reported as he punched in the commands.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus two-six and increasing." the automated computer voice announced across the bridge.

"Radiation levels spiking!" the environmental control officer shouted.

"They're trying to push us into the quicksand," Kirk said to no one in particular as he rose back to his feet and stared at the dead star's accretion disk.

Mitchell glanced down at the tactical redundancy panel between the helm and navigation stations. "Aft and starboard shields are beginning to sheer, Skipper!" he advised. "We can't take too much more of this!"

The floor rumbled and heaved once more.

"Direct hit port side, impulse!" LeBlanc yelled.

"Z plus one-eight-six mark five-zero!" Kirk snapped off. "Stand by to engage hyperdrive on my mark!"

"On it!" Mitchell enthusiastically shouted as the navigator turned and looked at them, as did several of the other replacement officers and crew around the bridge.

"Skipper, if we go to hyperdrive while—" the navigator began before Mitchell shut him down.

"Hyperdrive standing by!" Mitchell shouted as he reached across to the navigation console and made the necessary adjustments himself, cutting the younger man off sharply. Nobody questioned his skipper, especially in the middle of combat. "Do your job or get out of that chair!" Mitchell yelled at the navigator, who promptly fell in line.

Kirk stepped up behind his friend and acting first officer—and acting helm officer—and rested his hands on the back of his chair for balance, just in case.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus three-two and increasing," the computer announced.

The ship shuddered for several seconds—not the rumbling and heaving induced by enemy weapons fire, but rather a harmonic vibration that increased with intensity.

"Radiation levels now in the red!" the E.C.O. shouted from behind.

"Proximity alert. Proximity alert…" the computer voice began to repeat as the alert status indicator in the center front of the helm/nav console started flashing.

The lift doors swished open as the ship heaved once more under enemy fire. The medics inside braced themselves against the walls, then rushed out onto the bridge, spotted the fallen helm officer, and hurried to his aid.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus four-one and increasing," the computer updated.

"You're going to flash them?" the navigator sudden realization drew a quick grin and wink from Kirk.

Suddenly a violent heave upward and to the side hurled the navigator from his seat. Kirk instantly threw himself into his seat and took over beside Mitchell, who simply gave him a quick half-smile.

"Ready when you are, skipper."

"Warp controls on manual!" he shouted to Mitchell over the noise, then smashed his finger on the all-call. "All hands, stand by for emergency warp!"

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus two-three-one and increasing." the computer announced.

He could feel it too. His head began to feel saggy and heavy against his neck. It reminded him of the time he borrowed his uncle's Corvette. He pressed his head back against the headrest. He also knew that g-lock could occur to anyone once gravametcric forces hit plus-five. Since the days of early supersonic flight on Earth, even the most resilient pilots could expect to lose consciousness and black out around five 'g's.' A phenomenon like a black hole could quickly exceed that by orders of magnitude, even at this distance. 'Flashing'—what he was about to do—was greatly frowned upon. Only the legendary captain Garth had accomplished it and lived to talk about it during the battle of Axanar. Now here, many years later, acting captain James Tiberius Kirk was about to attempt the same with Charlie Garrovick's ship—and not only against just Klingons, but while in the clutches of a black hole. It was a maneuver that required precision in timing, as it involved using a full impulse thrust to pivot the warp engine nacelles on an enemy ship pre-

cisely at the moment they 'flashed' the warp field. The unsuspecting vessel would be hurled out of control long enough to come about and lay them out. Here, if things worked out as envisioned, that part would be handled by the black hole.

"Stand by!" Kirk shouted as he fine tuned one last instrument on his console.

Mitchell firmly gripped the control stick with both of his hands and fixed his gaze on Kirk, waiting.

"NOW!," Kirk shouted!

Mitchell drew back hard and to the right on the control stick just as the warp engines heaved them forward.

The lights flickered and dimmed and the deck shuddered as the ship lurched violently and swung around to pull away from the black hole. The warp engines screamed as they fought against the grip of the black hole's relentless gravitic forces.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus four-five and increasing," the computer announced.

"Hold on!" Kirk shouted.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus four-six and increasing," the computer's update was barely audible over the noise, but a sharp, piercing g-lock alert began to bleep loudly.

The bridge shuddered and the engines whined as Mitchell held fast on the control stick.

Suddenly the D-7 swept across the screen as it tumbled past *Farragut*, end over end, caught in the backwash vortex created by *Farragut's* warp flash. It was over in a matter of seconds as all watched the doomed Klingon warship tumble into oblivion.

"Emergency de-warp! Max impulse!" Kirk snapped, following which Mitchell began to adjust his grip on the control stick. The engines strained as he pushed them just beyond the red line, their thundering pulse resonating louder and deeper and still higher in pitch, keeping time with the ship's yaws, pitches, and rolls and

threatening to shake her apart. The young officer at Environmental Control spun sideways and retched all over the deck.

"Warning. Gravametric forces plus nine-nine and increasing," the computer announced.

As the black hole's monumental gravity began overpowering that generated by the ship's decks, the crew were forced to brace themselves against whatever they could, feeling the crushing pull on their bodies. Vision blurred and dizziness set in as the volume of blood reaching their brains decreased. Muscles strained against the pull. Kirk pressed himself back into the navigator's chair. Somewhere to his left an officer cried out in pain.

"We're pulling out of it!" Gary shouted over the noise, holding onto the console's leading edge with one hand while he manipulated the controls with the other.

"Gravametric forces plus nine-two," the computer announced as the engine noise began to decrease. "Plus eight-one. Plus six-five."

Kirk slowly relaxed his body, and with his left hand, reached out and gave Mitchell a pat on the shoulder.

"Gravametric forces normal."

"And that, my friends, is how we do that," Mitchell commented as everyone looked on the full swirling sprawl of the massive black hole that seemed to stretch to infinity.

Kirk drew a deep breath and sighed as the deck vibrations ceased and the engines finally fell silent. Turning and looking around, he watched through thinning smoke as everyone began to settle down and breathe normally again. Small ceiling and floor vents quickly sucked and filtered the vapors as the medic team quickly resumed tending to the injured.

"We're free and clear to navigate," Mitchell reported calmly as he sat back and let his hands slide off the console and drop to his lap.

Kirk rose from the navigator's chair and stepped backwards to put his hand on the captain's chair.

Gary made an elaborate show of rising up out of the helm chair, gestured toward it.

"Sorry, sir," the helm officer said meekly to Mitchell as he risked looking at Kirk.

"Have the medics check you out," Kirk said.

"Aye, Skipper," the helmsman nodded, glanced at Mitchell, and then resumed his post.

Kirk had been uncharacteristically compassionate lately with the surviving members of the Farragut crew. The new helm officer was third in line for the position and had only been at the helm one other time and not for that long. But he also knew this kind of special treatment had to end for the sake of the good of the entire crew. The veterans would have to accept the replacements and the replacements would have to fell like they belonged. Unfortunately, what made things even more difficult was uncertainty. He didn't know how long he was going to be acting captain. Sure, there was a part of him that entertained the remote idea that he might get *Farragut's* center seat—but did he really deserve it—if he was honest with himself.

When he left home for Starfleet, in his wildest dreams he never foresaw the kind of catastrophe that had beset *Farragut*. He imagined victory, or at the very least an honorable death at the hands of the Klingons—not victimized by some faceless amorphous blood-sucking deadly cloud off in the middle of nowhere. Not winning was the worst part. Tucking tail and running instead of avenging the fallen felt unnatural, and it had vexed him every moment of every day since. Here at least there was a momentary respite. Here on the edge of a black hole he had a mark on the other side of the ledger.

"Eyes on your boards, people," Gary barked across the bridge. "There could still be more Klingons out here." Mitchell had no reservations about spreading around a little tough love to replacement or veteran alike—not that he lacked com-

passion, but because he knew his best friend needed someone to be the hard-ass for him. A good exec usually became the skipper's best friend and confidant. He and Gary already had that working for them years before fate put them together on the same bridge—well okay, not exactly fate.

Kirk tapped the all-call on his chair. "All hands this is the acting captain," he announced. "Stand down from general quarters. Repair stations and report." He closed the all-call as Mitchell walked over to join Kirk gazing out at the spectacular accretion disk of the immense black hole.

"What the hell are Klingons doing out here?" he asked after a moment.

"I don't know, Jim, but if there's one thing I've learned—where there's one Klingon, there are usually more."

Kirk looked at him for a moment, but let it go, then turned his eyes back to the viewport as he asked, "What kind of shape are we in?"

"Preliminary reports say we're just a little bumped and bruised. A lot better shape than the Klingons," Gary answered, then added. "No wonder they hate you so much."

"It's the family name they hate," Kirk said.

"We were lucky," Mitchell added in a more serious tone.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kirk looked at him.

"Flashing that poor bastard. What did you think I meant?" Mitchell asked.

"Nothing."

"You mean being caught off-guard like that?" Gary turned to him. "This ship's been through a lot, Jim. You've been through a lot."

"Last time I checked, that's not an official excuse," Kirk said.

"Well, when you lose the 'acting' part of captain, then it can officially be your fault."

He and Kirk shared a brief smile. "Remind me again why I brought you here?"

"My charm and good looks." Gary shot back. Both smiled again before getting back to business. "I'll give you a rundown from the repair teams the second I have it."

Gary stepped off to make his way back to Tac-Ops as Kirk gazed with satisfaction at his old friend.

No, fate had indeed not intervened to put them together again. Captain Ron Tracey of *Exeter* probably hated him worse than the Klingons for stealing Gary away to serve as his X.O. He did feel a little guilty at pressing the transfer, but given the recent catastrophe at Tycho IV, Starfleet was being unusually flexible. Even the higher-ups had enough wisdom to know when to indulge the seemingly personal whims of the son of the legendary George Kirk. Besides, who else were they going to send to fill Charlie Garrovick's spot? Because the protracted war that had broken out following his father's, President Alarius' and Chancellor Arkanon's deaths aboard *Starfleet One* after the summit had ground on for so many years, many in Starfleet believed the Klingons were actually winning. Thus, pulling any battle-seasoned veteran off the front line just to nurse-maid a crippled ship and crew back to health would be unwise.

Because he had access to the command logs now, he knew there had been reservations about leaving him in the hot-seat too. They had even tried desperately to drag poor Varian Cain out of retirement and put him back on his old ship. Cain had diplomatically told them in so many polite words to go to hell. Then they went after Richard Robau, who echoed Cain's sentiments. He recalled Robau's response in one of the many back and forth communications—that "galavanting around the cosmos is a game for the young." Furthermore both he and Cain had both said in so many words, that having a Kirk back in command of George Kirk's *Farragut* was fitting. He hoped both of them were right.

No Federation starship had ever endured what *Farragut* had. Half the crew was dead and the skipper in critical condition by the time it was over.

It all began with strangely cryptic orders to investigate Tycho IV. *Farragut* was ordered off the line and warped nearly halfway across the Federation to the remote uninhabited world. Nobody had even seen the vaporous killer cloud murder

the first survey team. When it attacked the second time, fears arose immediately that the Klingons had resorted to "smart swarms" as they were coined in the mid twenty-first century on Earth, when smart swarm nanotechnology was utilized for the first time in the third world war.

Runaway technology, runaway overpopulation and runaway climate change had formed a perfect storm that exploded into Earth's devastating third world war. When it was finally over, nearly two-thirds of Earth's population had been culled—and much of the culling was done by smart swarms, which were weaponized swarms of programmable nanoparticles engineered to mimic earlier deadly forms of chemical, neurological and bacteriological agents. They were deployed by "scattering them" in such a wide burst so as to be undetectable until they "swarmed" on an unsuspecting preprogrammed enemy target somewhere in the world—and then vanished just as quickly as they had swarmed. An invisible enemy.

Originally, swarm technology was developed for weather control and border protection, but their strategic capabilities were so immediately obvious, that the United States, China and Russia began a second deadly arms race that made the ancient days of the Cold War seem warm and fuzzy in comparison.

The smart swarm that culled *Farragut's* crew "fed" on red blood cells—in particular human red blood cells. This is why Klingons were immediately suspect rather than some natural alien gas. They were probably using Tycho IV as a testing range for the weapon and *Farragut* had blindly wandered right into it.

Kirk felt that same familiar nagging in his gut again that he had felt when Charlie Garrovick first read him in on the mission. Each time he started replaying the catastrophe in his mind he had felt it. Something was off. Something was strange and uncomfortable about the entire mission but he just couldn't put his finger on what it was. Following the disaster, Starfleet had sealed and classified the failed mission under top secret status. *Farragut's* crew—what was left of it—had all been debriefed and sworn to secrecy. The whole thing reminded him of what had happened to him at the Academy after he hacked the *Kobayashi Maru* test. Only with Koby, death was just a score. With Tycho, it had been all too real.

The same four words had tormented his every waking hour since the catastrophe. *He should have fired*. He'd had a clear shot at the swarming cloud. He could have stopped it from attacking Charlie Garrovick—but he'd frozen. It was his fault the skipper ended up in Starfleet Medical.

He looked across the bridge. There was Gary. He was like a lighthouse in a storm. Thank God he was here now. He took notice of the two medics once again as they left the bridge, one of them stopping briefly to examine one of the security officers posted by the doors who was rubbing an apparently injured elbow. All four of them were new faces and he didn't know any of their names. He knew only that they had come over from *Constellation*. The redshirts? He had no idea where they came from. He didn't even know the all the names of the surviving half of the *Farragut* crew. All of them had temporarily been shifted about to fill the higher positions left by those who had been massacred until replacements could be found. When the replacements finally did arrive, they were not welcomed by the surviving crew because had already forged a bond so profound and deep as only those who had served together could. Because of this, he had decided to keep the *Farragut* survivors in as many mission-critical positions as he possibly could. They were the heart and soul of the ship. They were a band of sisters and brothers. They had fought and died together.

"All decks report only minor damage and non-critical systems outages," Gary's voice interrupted. "That thing is designed to sit on you know," he added sarcastically as his eyes focused on the skipper's chair.

Kirk knew well that he had every right to sit in the center seat as the ship's acting captain, but he also knew that seeing someone sitting in that chair would bring a sense of unity and confidence both to the veterans and to the replacements. He was going to have to sit his ass down in that damn chair for the good of the crew and he knew it. Just not now. Not yet.

If he could have wrangled Leonard McCoy here too—or "Bones" as he had called him since his Academy days—he'd have *both* his most trusted friends at his side. Gary was his continuity of life. Bones was his continuity of conscience. But Bones had been snatched up by the captain of the *Excalibur*, and while he'd man-

aged to snatch Gary from the clutches of Ron Tracey, it was doubtful he could have pulled off the same coup a second time with Bones.

"Rig for silent running until we reach Outpost Fourteen," Kirk said.

"Silent running, aye," Gary responded with a quick, simple nod, then turned toward the nav station. "Helm, rig for silent running."

"Aye, Exec. Adjusting warp slipstream for silent running."

"Comms are dark, Exec," the Comms Officer followed up.

"I'll be in my—in the ready room." Kirk let his eyes linger on the front viewport for a couple moments longer before he finally turned away and headed for the lift. As he approached it, the doors parted and a female officer in a flight deck uniform was literally in his face. An attractive dark-haired woman her late twenties.

"Skipper," she said as she stepped respectfully at attention to one side of the elevator to allow him to pass.

"As you were lieutenant—" Kirk began, but just couldn't remember her name. She was one of the survivors—a deck officer before the flight chief was killed.

"Ross," she offered helpfully. "Commander Ross," she added.

Ross kind of looked like a Vulcan, with her dark, short bob-cut hair and bangs. When he saw her the first time he had thought the same thing. Gary had since made it a joke. But she definitely was not a Vulcan according to the ship's crew log. She was also definitely attractive with her full, pouty lips and constantly serious demeanor. And those eyes—then he remembered those eyes. He had come running in, phaser drawn, with an armed security team. They were too late. The creature had already attacked and left six dead. Then he spotted Ross. She was cooly and efficiently barking out orders in the middle of the hanger deck while kneeling over the dead flight chief's body. It was impressive. She caught his gaze for only a moment, looked up at him with tears pooling in her eyes, then stood up and was off again shouting orders to the flight crew—the remaining flight crew.

"Yes, of course, commander," Kirk smiled at her. How could he forget her name? She had made such an impression on him.

"I was just coming up to report," she followed up.

"Report to Commander Mitchell," he directed her with a gesture toward Mitchell, then walked into the elevator and the doors closed.

Ross shifted her gaze to Mitchell and stared silently at him for a moment.

"Skipper's off the bridge!" Mitchell announced, giving her the ever so briefest of a glance. "I have the con."

Ross walked purposefully over to him as he stepped up onto the pedestal and sat down in the center seat, obviously having no reservations about doing so.

"My report, sir," Ross said as she held a small data module out to him. He took it and frowned.

"Is this like the last one?"

"Sir?"

"Ross, these reports of yours are like reading a novel."

"I endeavor to be accurate," she intoned.

"Maybe we can have just the Cliff's Notes from now on?" he proposed.

"Yes, sir." She asked, then furrowed her eyebrows. "Who is Cliff?"

"Huh?"

"Who is Cliff—so I can consult with him."

"I don't know anybody named Cliff." Mitchell shot back sharply.

"But you just told me to refer to his notes."

"Whose notes?" Mitchell's voice rose.

"Cliff's notes, sir."

"Cliff—no— " Mitchell shook his head in frustration. "That's not what it means—look, there's no Cliff—Cliff's notes is just a saying that comes from—actu-

ally I have no idea where it comes from—but it means give it to me with less words. Summarize. Write like you talk—only don't be annoying like you are right now." Then he handed her back the module. "You can start with this one."

This garnered only the slightest if not completely imperceptible frown from her as she stood looking at the module.

"As you were."

"Yes, sir," she said, then walked back off to the engineering station.

Gary shook his head, then watched her walk away. She was a little skinny for his taste but—she turned back and caught him watching her. He quickly looked forward. "Helm, what's our ETA? How far behind did our little run-in with the Klingons put us?"

"Approximately thirty-seven minutes," the helmsman answered him. Then he looked back over his shoulder, smiled, and added, "But I've made up for it, sir."

"Just *get us there*, Mister Harper," Mitchell came back firmly.

"Aye, sir," Harper confirmed as he faced forward again.

Mitchell risked another glance over at Ross, where he saw her conferring with the chief engineer—the *acting* chief engineer.

Okay, she was kind of attractive.

CHAPTER 29

Novikov

Varian Cain was running a lot faster than he should have been for his age, and as he emerged from the side hallway that led from the auxiliary communications center and tried to negotiate the turn into the main corridor, his hard-soled boots slid out from under him on the polished deck.

He barely managed to steady himself and avoid falling on his backside, but in the process ran shoulder-first into the far bulkhead with a solid thud that he felt all the way to his toes. He was definitely going to feel that tomorrow, assuming he was still alive tomorrow, he told himself as he regained his footing and picked up his pace again as he ran down the curving corridor, the lone figure moving against the wave of frightened *Novikov* crew who were scrambling in the other direction, running for the armored airlock hatches that lined the left side bulkhead—hatches that led into the escape pods.

The escape pods. Dozens of them were right there—right beside him, all along the corridor. One step to the right and he could be safely away in moments. But he couldn't stay with the crew. If he did he would only endanger them that much more. Without him among them they stood a fighting chance of escaping with their lives. No, he had to go his own way. He had to stick to his own escape plans. Not to mention, much more was at stake.

His orders had come directly from one of the top admirals in Command's inner circle—Top Secret classification—for his eyes-only. No one, not even *Novikov's* captain, knew who he really was or why he was really aboard. Unfortunately, the Klingon task force that had been stalking them finally made its move. Cain had no choice but to abandon the ship and her crew to their fate.

As he ran past each of the small viewports set between the escape pod hatches, he caught brief glimpses of one of the D-7 battlecruisers as it came about and bore down on them, firing both of her main disruptor cannons. Those Klingon bastards were firing right through the wall of escape pods! The neon green bolts struck the ship just as the door to the transporter room slid aside for him. He fell against the jamb and had to grab hold as the ship rumbled and rolled under the assault, and as best as he could tell the chief standing behind the controls was too busy bracing himself to notice his arrival—or he just didn't care.

Cain crept up behind the transporter chief, walking as quickly and as quietly as he could on the balls of his feet, hoping that he'd make it before the chief had time to lock out the controls. He reached his target, raised his hand to his shoulder, and applied the Vulcan nerve pinch like an expert. The chief grunted, then collapsed silently into his arms. The advanced training he'd undertaken almost a year ago now was finally paying off. He really couldn't stand Vulcans, but the instructor had been a Vulcan, and had decided to teach the technique.

Stumbling as the ship took another hit, Cain dragged the unconscious man back toward the door, which opened to reveal the continuing chaos of a frightened crew running for the escape pods. "He's been hurt!" he yelled into the corridor at no one in particular. "Someone get him to a pod!"

Two crewmen fell out of the flow of personnel and grabbed the transporter chief by the arms. "What about you, sir?" one of them asked as they wrapped the chief's arms around their shoulders.

"Go on! I'll take another pod!" Cain told them. "Go on!"

Apparently satisfied with his answer, the crewmen swung the transporter chief around and manhandled him away.

Cain took a step back through the door into the transporter room and slapped his hand down over the emergency close button. As soon as the door had closed, he whipped out his communicator, flipped it open, and adjusted one of the dials. "Computer!" he shouted. "Root access, authorization sigma three-one, code seven-three-six-one! Emergency over-ride! Secure access to the transporter room."

He stepped over behind the transporter control console and after activating several instruments, hovered his finger over the console, waiting.

A sound like the faint whisper of hissing air reached his ears, which popped with the slight change in pressure. The computer's response over his communicator followed almost immediately after. "Confirmed. Transporter room access restricted."

He jammed his finger on the console control and closed his communicator—which he attached to his belt. Activating another panel, he punched the coordinates he'd memorized from his orders into the panel as the ship shuddered once more under the Klingons' endless barrage. Then he hesitated. Long distance beaming had never been accomplished before. At least not successfully. It had been attempted a few times from planet to ship, and once from ship to ship, but no one had ever survived reintegration for very long. However, he did have two things going for him that none of those unfortunate others had had. First, he was beaming to a relatively stationary target, and second, a Vulcan mathematician had run the calculations. So, as long as he input everything correctly he should be okay.

Hell, even dying in the vacuum of space would have been preferable being captured by the Klingons. Space would kill him in seconds. The Klingons could drag it out for days.

Taking a deep breath, he energized the system and actuated the three slides, starting the beaming sequence, then yanked his phaser pistol from his side and dashed up onto the platform. As soon as he felt the familiar prickling of the transporter taking hold of him. It always reminded him of the tingling he felt in his leg when it fell asleep—except over his entire body. He set his phaser to overload, tossed it away, and watched it slide to a stop on the floor near the transporter control console.

The tingling sensation reached his head and the tunnel vision that accompanied it began to blind him. In his last moments he focused on the phaser on the floor. It would soon reach critical overload and explode, reducing the entire console to scrap and destroying all evidence of his whereabouts…which right about now were nowhere…

CHAPTER 30

Last Full Measure

From beneath his tactical helmet, Lieutenant Allen, commanding officer of *Novikov's* contingent of *Military Assault Command Operations* troops, stared at the various colored graphics and other radicals glowing in virtual space, projected in front of his eyes. His team was deployed last minute to *Novikov*, which was a little odd given that *Novikov* was a research vessel. MACO teams were usually only posted to ships of the line. Up to the moment of the Klingon attack, he was beginning to wonder if some higher-up at Starfleet hadn't gotten bent out of shape over some recent event and was sending them to the hind end of the galaxy to make a point. Obviously that wasn't the reason, but now he had another mystery. Why would a Klingon capital ship come so far to the middle of nowhere to blow up a science vessel? The answer was easy, of course. Some top secret military science project was afoot.

The bad news was that they'd been caught totally flatfooted. The Klingons had easily hacked into the hanger bay system and locked open the doors for the approaching formation of Klingon assault shuttles.

Other than for the critical bridge personnel, the entire *Novikov* crew had already evacuated the ship—which really meant nothing if the Klingons won the day. He hated to think about what would happen to them. Their possible outcome would be to be blown to oblivion. Worst scenario would be capture and end up in some Klingon prisoner of war compound somewhere—which was in essence nowhere, because anyone going there never came back. Ever. When considering any of this, the question of why the hell they were even mounting a defense made no sense. They certainly weren't buying lives. Maybe time—time needed to destroy what-

ever it was they were protecting. The captain hadn't even had time to debrief him on whatever the hell they were protecting from the Klingons. In fact, in the month or so onboard, he hadn't seen one cargo container or any other equipment to indicate any hint of some ongoing effort. Nothing.

What the hell.

"Select your targets carefully," he calmly whispered into his comms. But he knew that all the calm and confidence in the galaxy wouldn't make up for tactical advantage that the Klingon assault forces were going to enjoy as a result of their superior numbers. He also knew that after spending so many years on the brink of all out war with the Federation, they were going to be well versed in standard Starfleet defense procedures, so what little calm and confidence he actually did feel wasn't rooted very deeply within him. Nevertheless, he had to portray it for his troops. It was their job to hold the line and he needed them to believe they could do it.

Ninety seconds.

Somewhere along the spectrum that stretched from truth to total falsehood lived patriotism and devotion to duty. "There is a time that comes for every leader when they know the battle is lost, and yet they give of their last full measure and inspire those they lead to do the same," his military history professor had once told him. He understood now what the old veteran of the first Klingon war had been talking about. This was one of those times—a textbook example, in fact. He and his troops were about to lay down their lives. He could have told them the truth. He could have told them that none of them were going to make it out alive. But he'd chosen to inspire them. He'd chosen to let them believe they had a chance—that they were fighting for something.

One minute.

Actually, they were fighting for something, at least according to Captain Alanis. They were buying precious time with their lives, the captain had told him privately just minutes ago in the elevator. Precious time for what she hadn't said, but she'd scoffed in the face of the suggestion that they scuttle the *Novikov* as a last resort,

which was more than a little confusing considering the importance of not allowing her to fall into enemy hands.

Precious time for what?

The Klingons obviously wanted something or they wouldn't have bothered trying to board in the first place. They simply would have blown the *Novikov* to dust. If there was one thing the Klingons weren't, they weren't the packrats of the galaxy. They traveled lean. Anything without strategic purpose was discarded.

Thirty seconds.

Knowing Starfleet tactics, the Klingons would know that their first hurdle was going to be making their way across a completely depressurized hanger deck and then getting through the one only set of doors that led into the rest of the ship without damaging them. They weren't going to be disappointed in that regard, either, Allen reflected as he glanced up at the environmental readout panel on the wall beside the double airlock-rated access doors to verify that the pressure had in fact reached zero. He'd seen to that personally.

For those precious first few seconds—maybe an entire minute if they were lucky—he and his troops would have clumsy, slow-moving Klingons in bulky, not easily maneuverable E-V suits to contend with, rather than warriors in full battle gear. Unfortunately, once enough of them got through that door, they would establish a secure perimeter, de-suit, and then continue to press. And one way or another they would get through that door. He and his troops weren't going to be able to stop them.

Another small holographic screen opened on his virtual tactical display showing the first half dozen assault shuttles landing on the deck, with twice that many more still holding station off the stern. Dozens of heavily armed warriors outfitted in fully armored combat pressure suits and helmets deployed en masse from their landing craft, disruptor rifles at the ready, bat'leths attached to their backs.

"Hold fast." Allen whispered as he glanced around at each of his squad, only to find that they were all looking back at him. He locked eyes with each and every one of them down the length of the corridor and traded nods of resolve. When all

was said and done, the Klingons were going to be proud to have engaged such a unit in battle.

They were going to make the Klingons' day. How was that for irony?

"When they bottleneck in the airlock, A-Team hold them as long as you can. B-Team stand by to cover their retreat in five minutes from position two, then both teams re-form and hold as long as you can at Engineering."

A little last-second pep talk never hurt, but the reality of the outcome was no mystery to anyone. The Klingons would win the day, but if he had his way, at great cost. Holding the line would buy valuable time for the crew to evac safely and for the command and control systems to be purged.

Most of the Klingon assault forces gathered into small fire teams and raced for what they no doubt thought would be tactically advantageous positions throughout the hanger bay. Those who remained formed a larger force and charged the airlock directly. Several of them began firing their disruptors indiscriminately, seemingly at random toward the ceiling and the walls. The video feeds on Allen's tactical hologram flickered to three dimensional static in front of his eyes, then off. The Klingons had taken out the swarm of tactical drones with their EMP pulsers. All that remained on his visor hologram were the colored radicals fed to him by his phaser rifle.

"Damn it," he mumbled to himself, realizing immediately that their shooting hadn't been indiscriminate after all. They'd been taking out all the security drones they could see.

He raised his phaser rifle toward the airlock door. As a veteran of several minor skirmishes with the Klingons, the one thing he knew for sure was that they weren't stupid. They hadn't earned their frightening reputation by making mistakes in battle. War was what they did. It was their way of life, much like Japan's ancient samurai. They invaded and conquered, and they were damn good at it.

"Deploy swarm," Allen whispered into his comms. One of his squad brought his wrist control up and punched a control on it. Suddenly what looked like a swarm of large bumblebees swooped in from behind them and flew toward the

bulkhead where they halted in a hovering black cloud several feet in front of the airlock.

"Cut power," Allen whispered into his comms. Suddenly everything plunged into pitch darkness—not gradually, but instantly—shut off at the mains. The Klingons were about to get a dose of MACO tactics. To be sure, they were not expecting to face a MACO squad on a science and research vessel. This should come as a nice little surprise.

Silence. Then a muffled sound on the other side of the airlock.

"Flashers." Allen spoke into his comms. Almost instantaneously Allen's helmet dropped a blinder hood in front of his eyes and halfway down his face. The same blinders deployed on each of the squad helmets as well, and then the pitch darkness was suddenly a chaotic rapid strobing of blinding blue light, emitted by strobes on the helmets of the MACO squad itself. Each MACO was now looking at just their tactical hologram beneath the blinder, which filtered out the flashers and gave them a greenish composite of the scene.

Suddenly the airlock doors shattered into hundreds of molten metal pieces and exploded out into the hanger bay ahead of the gale force depressurization winds that blew past the MACOs out into the hanger deck, taking several Klingon attackers by surprise and hurling them out into space. Just half an hour prior he had instructed the engineer to raise deck pressure to 1.5 atmospheres to enhance the effect.

The black swarm was carried along with it, and like bullets, they struck anything in their path with explosive force, blowing away chunks of the Klingon pressure suits, along with bits and pieces of the Klingons themselves, instantaneously taking the first wave of attackers out of the battle.

Then the MACOs opened fire whoever remained with lashing rapid-fire bolts from their phaser rifles. It was a turkey shoot at first. Lifeless Klingon bodies were swept up by the winds and blown back out into the hanger bay, often taking another with them. Allen almost felt sorry for the poor bastards. Almost.

And then everything changed.

Time seemed to slow down as Allen spotted one of the Klingons pulling something from his belt—a spherical object, metallic gray, about the size of a baseball. He slid a button-like control on it which illuminated a small red indicator light, then hurled it underhanded up the corridor, between the MACO ranks. It was the last thing he did, as he was immediately cut down by a lashing phaser bolt. Tunnel-vision set in as Allen locked his eyes on the round metallic object, which rolled forward in a steady hover instead of falling to the deck. And then it exploded in a blinding flash of white light and fire.

All he could hear was the high pitched ringing in his ears and the sound of his own breathing. All he could see were shapes in shades of gray as they passed in front of his visor. But he could himself being hurled into the air and carried aloft in the tornadic winds that swept toward the airlock. He discerned a large burly figure ahead of him—one of the Klingons. He threw his arms out and grabbed hold of the Klingon as they collided, dragging him along in a tumbling, airborne grappling bear-hug.

He and his Klingon companion slammed hard into the doorjamb, and he felt his breath rush from his lungs as he smashed chest-first into the hard chest plate of the soldier. He dropped his lifeless companion, who hurtled through the airlock doors, then grabbed hold of the smoldering remains of the doorway. He couldn't hold on. His fingers gave out and he tumbled weightlessly over the victorious enemy troops as he bounced like a rag doll off one of their shuttles and flew helplessly toward the gaping void beyond the open hanger doors. He gasped, wide-eyed, desperate for air, but as he drifted into the vast, dark emptiness of space, there simply wasn't anything there for him to breathe. He felt a prickly, icy sensation on every inch of his skin.

Then a numbness that started in his head and his ears and then spread quickly throughout his chest and the rest of his body as he watched the blurry, green-tinted, and badly wounded *Novikov* sail through his tumbling field of vision one last time…

CHAPTER 31

Prath

The gale-force winds of *Novikov's* escaping atmosphere blew past Fleet Commander Prath. Son of Kalor Arkanon, Prath glared through his helmet with the grim confident expression of a battle-forged leader, his light gray-white eyes burning like starlight beneath his heavy brow. He slammed his right fist onto a control on the metallic frame that had been attached to the inside of the blown airlock, bringing the rush of escaping atmosphere to an end, leaving only the familiar sound of a forcefield buzzing behind him.

With the first wave of *Novikov's* defenders dispatched, those warriors who hadn't advanced deeper into the bowels of the Federation battleship—Prath's personal guard—lined both sides of the corridor. The warriors immediately faced inward and snapped to attention.

Prath reached up and twisted his helmet slightly to one side. The seal broke, and with the hiss of equalizing pressure, he removed his helmet and handed it off to the officer in charge of his personal guard, knowing exactly where he would be standing without having to look.

"Commander Prath!" a voice broke over his E-V suit comm-link, "the bridge is ours!"

Prath inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the too cool and too dry odorless air, then blew it out with resolve and marched forward. His guards fell into line behind him and followed with their weapons leveled into a nearby elevator. Just inside the elevator door he turned around, forcing his soldiers to step around him either to the right or left.

No sooner had the doors closed in his face, they reopened again to look onto the *Novikov's* battle-scarred bridge. Through the main viewport he saw his ship, the Imperial Battlecruiser *Aavian*, holding station a short distance off. In the center of the bridge, he eyed the captured *Novikov* bridge crew, who'd been corralled under the watchful guard of some of his best warriors, most of whom were, like him, of the pure race—not the human-Kalar half-breeds who had been repatriated after the hand-over of Gastillion years before.

His blood pressure rose with hatred for the human atrocities that had been afflicted upon the Klingon origin world. For almost a century, the human settlers—invaders—had systematically all but annihilated the entire indigenous male Kalar population and enslaved the females. The so-called glorious unification between Kronos and its lost brother-world Gastillion, brokered by the great betrayer George Samuel Kirk, was a sad reality. What little remained of the mighty Kalar warrior klans on Gastillion after a hundred or so Earth years was a half-bred population of weakling humanoids who barely resembled their mighty Kalar forebears.

It was the single worst catastrophe in Klingon history.

Path's father, in his last act as Chancellor before his murder at the hands of his "friend" George Samuel Kirk, had been to embrace the old-world half-breed populations of Gastillion and integrate them into the Klingon Empire.

Memories of his father were clouded and conflicted. But one thing that he had no conflict over was the traitorous and cowardly betrayal of his father by George Samuel Kirk. Prath would, until his last day and his last breath, seek vengeance on the family Kirk, until every last one of them were dead. Since the great villain George Samuel Kirk had been killed in the Federation President's transport along with his father, that was the vengeance that would have to suffice.

With unbridled hatred in his eyes, Prath looked the captured *Novikov* bridge crew over with disdain. What a fragile looking species. How his old-world Klingon brothers on Gastillion had allowed their pure blood to be corrupted by humans repulsed him. Everything about humans repulsed him.

One tall and slender, very lithe-looking olive-skinned female with long shiny black hair—attractive even by Klingon standards—had on her uniform two solid bands with a broken one between them. She was evidently the captain.

"I will ask once," Prath announced in an unusually low and coldly monotone voice for a Klingon as he walked slowly past the *Novikov* crew. He stopped in front of the female wearing the captain's tunic, glared into her deep brown eyes, and asked, "Varian Cain. Where is he?"

The female set her jaw firm and didn't answer, but a poorly disguised fear shone in her eyes. She was no ship's captain. No doubt the real captain had switched uniforms with her to protect herself.

Prath shifted his glare to the blue-shirted female with hair the color of metal rust standing to the other's right. She was shorter but stronger looking and more defiant than the one wearing the captain's uniform. Prath grabbed the slim olive-skinned woman wearing the captain's uniform and lifted her easily off her feet, ignoring her scream, then hurled her across the bridge where she slammed head-first and upside-down against one of the consoles with a thud, then tumbled lifeless to the deck.

"Perhaps now your *real* captain will step forward now!" Prath continued in his cold, emotionless tone as he faced his prisoners again.

"I am Captain Alanis!" the defiant woman wearing the lieutenant's uniform announced as she boldly stepped forward, moving deliberately between Prath and her crew to prevent any further carnage.

Prath stepped to her, towering over her, and glared into her eyes. She stared fearlessly right back at him.

"Sandrina Maria Alanis," she informed him without the slightest waver in her firm tone.

"Captain, tell me what I want to know, and your crew will die quickly."

"Varian Cain is not aboard this ship, Commander," Alanis advised him boldly. "He retired several years ago. I can show you the records if you want to see them for yourself."

"You are lying, Captain," Prath confidently proclaimed. "I know that Cain is onboard this vessel. You will tell me where he is."

"I don't know where he is," Alanis calmly and defiantly replied.

"Kill this one," Prath said almost immediately, gesturing to another of the captured *Novikov* bridge crew.

"I can't tell you what I don't know!" Alanis raised her voice, trying not to sound too much like she was pleading, even though that was exactly what she was doing. "If you're referring to Captain Cain of *Farragut*, he retired years ago! That is the truth!"

"HoH ghaH!" Prath ordered.

"No!" Alanis shouted as she tried to step forward to stop the killing—but she was yanked back by two soldiers.

The guard fired. His victim barely managed to start screaming under the disruptor's whine before his throat and most of his neck dissolved and he collapsed dead in a heap to the deck. The smell of his burning flesh assaulted Alanis' nostrils as she struggled violently but futilely to break free from the warriors who were still holding her.

"Goddamn you!" Alanis screamed with fury as the rest of the *Novikov* bridge crew gasped.

Prath studied Alanis for a moment, and then without the slightest hesitation, pulled his pistol from its holster and pointed it at someone standing in the line behind her, but just as he depressed the trigger Alanis wrenched free of her captors and grabbed Prath's pistol and shoved it into the center of her own chest as it fired. Then with an expression somewhere between victory and anguish on her face, dropped to the deck and died.

An ever so slight look of surprise flashed across Prath's face as he realized Alanis had defeated his efforts to break her by killing her crew in front of her. Then a look of resign swept his face as he let his hand holding his pistol drop to his side, following which he re-holstered his pistol. He looked at the faces of the remaining *Novikov* bridge crew. They were shocked into fearful, uncertain silence by the murder of their leader. Prath knew they knew nothing of Cain or his whereabouts. Such information was privileged, and it had just expired at his feet with the only one who possessed it.

He turned and started walking toward the elevator. Without breaking pace as he passed in front of his second, one of the half-breeds named Kor, he said, "Kill them all. Destroy the ship."

He stepped into the elevator with his guards and turned to face out again, and the last thing he saw before the doors shut in front of him were several flashes of disruptor fire.

"Commander Prath!" a voice barked over his E-V communicator.

"What?" Prath bellowed.

"Someone used a transporter to beam off the Earth ship during the battle!"

"Where? There is nowhere to go?"

"Yes, it is strange, Commander. The beam was directed somewhere deep in empty space."

"Prepare for departure! Set course for those coordinates!

CHAPTER 32

Farragut

Bathed in the dim blueish hue from a small single faint ceiling light and the monochromatic starlight that shafted in through the panoramic bay window behind him, acting captain James Tiberius Kirk of the Federation Starship *Farragut* sat alone in the skipper's ready room, behind his mentor's desk. After a few moments he leaned forward and switched on a solitary antique brass desk lamp that cast a small pool of light across the pages of a large bound volume opened in front of him. Longtime *Farragut* tradition obliged that the skipper's log was to be handwritten in an actual logbook. Well, sort of. The computer would automatically transcribe everything for the "official" Starfleet record, but for everyone who skippered *Farragut*, the bound logbook was part of the job.

The book reminded him of some of his father's old books—the ones he'd kept in his study when they lived in Iowa, before that awful tornado destroyed the entire family farm. It was as thick as *A Tale of Two Cities*, or at least as thick as he remembered it to be, but its binding was much more ornate, complete with inlaid gold leaf highlights that included the ship's logo. When Captain Garrovick first introduced his newly minted first officer to the quaint tradition, he'd thought for sure that his father had been the skipper who'd started it, but he'd been wrong. The tradition went much further back than that.

He gazed off into the darkness. He preferred it dark, and spent as little time as possible in the room—just enough to dispense with the tasks of his temporary command duties as acting skipper. He didn't belong there. He certainly didn't earn it by any means. This was Captain Garrovick's office, not his. But he'd also known

that sooner or later he was going to have to take the time to update the ship's log. But what to write?

He'd considered taking the logbook somewhere else to work, but it belonged here, on the skipper's desk. And there was that familiar feeling again—that ever-present ache of guilt—feeling like a trespasser in someone else's home. Unfortunately he no choice but to remain longer than usual this time. He'd put off updating the logbook too long and he had only himself to blame for procrastinating.

He recalled the very first time he'd ever visited the office, having been summoned there by Captain Garrovick barely a half an hour after he'd reported aboard as a newly assigned Academy graduate. Charlie Garrovick was more than the gold braids on his uniform, and the first thing he'd noticed about his ready room was the huge bay window set in the bulkhead directly behind the skipper's desk. Wide and curved, it looked out over the port and starboard nacelles, and if one walked up close to it, down onto the secondary hull below. It reminded him of the great cabin found on the naval tall ships of yore—the great British ships of the line he'd imagined when reading the *Horatio Hornblower* novels he'd found on his grandfather's bookshelf in Gettysburg. Apparently they had belonged to his father when he was a boy. He hadn't read all eleven books and short stories in the series, but he'd gotten as far as Lieutenant Hornblower. His interest had sparked a trip to Boston on his fourteenth birthday to visit the U.S.S. Constitution on it's 400th anniversary. After that, they traveled to Gloucester where he got to sail on an actual schooner—the *Thomas E. Lannon*.

Kirk realized he'd been tapping his thumb on the end of the stylus as if that might somehow shake some words he could use out of it. No matter how hard he tried though, he couldn't decide how to start. How do you write about a catastrophe that took two-hundred lives and put the skipper in Starfleet Medical? It wasn't like he couldn't remember every detail. He in fact remembered too much—too clearly. He could have gone on for pages. But the book that lay open in front of him was the ship's logbook, not a confessional. He hesitated for a brief moment, knowing that he should keep trying, then set the stylus down in the crease between the pages in front of him without making a single mark. Its tiny tip briefly glowed blue-white, then dimmed to its dull standby mode.

He reached up and tapped the lamp off, plunging the room into into the dim, ghostly blue-gray darkness again, then sat back in his chair and gently massaged his throbbing forehead and temples. He was sitting in the skipper's chair at the skipper's desk, inside the skipper's office, which was still filled with the skipper's military antiques—a wide variety of valuable items that all of the ship's previous skippers had collected over the years from all over the known galaxy. What right did he have to be there? If he'd only fired. If he hadn't frozen…

As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, they fell on the cabinet mounted on the far wall that held most of those military antiques on display. All of the ship's previous skippers had contributed something to the collection, including his father.

He suddenly realized that something was missing.

A childhood memory of the Family Day he'd spent onboard *Farragut* with his father echoed in his mind as he gazed at a particular spot on a particular wall where a pair of small hooks had once held a Civil War era Union officer's saber and scabbard. What could have happened to it? It had belonged to his father—his contribution to the collection. Surely he would have left it there for all the future skippers to enjoy. So who had removed it?

"Damn it all," he mumbled. This was pointless. He couldn't concentrate. He spun his chair around to face the window. He gazed out on the endless horizontal rain of stars sweeping past the ship and fading into infinity. Just an optical illusion created by their travel through warped space, but a beautiful view nonetheless—one that he marveled at every time he saw it.

"Computer," he said as he continued to watch the stars. "Mission overview. When was the last report received from Outpost Fourteen logged?"

"No records exist for an Outpost Fourteen." the familiar soothing female voice of the computer responded.

Kirk sighed knowingly, instantly realizing he had forgotten to log in securely. "Confirm security access, Kirk, James T."

For a very brief moment, from one of the ceiling media ports, a dim red glow bathed him, then shifted to a green hue, then switched off.

"Outpost Fourteen Operations, last report received by Starfleet Command three days, two hours, fifteen minutes ago."

"Nothing at all since?"

"Affirmative."

Kirk turned the chair back toward the desk just far enough so that he could see the terminal and gazed at it for a moment, confused. "Affirmative, there's been nothing since? Or affirmative, there *has?*"

"There have been no transmissions received from Outpost Fourteen in the time period previously specified."

The door chime sounded.

"You could have just said that the first time." he chided the computer as he stood up and stepped over to the window to gaze out. "Come," he raised his voice.

The door slid open and Gary stepped inside, silhouetted by the bright light that streamed in around him from the corridor before the door closed behind him again.

"You look like your dad," he commented as he looked at his friend's back, silhouetted by the panoramic window full of stars.

Kirk turned to look at Gary, then leaned over the desk to turn the lamp back on as Gary walked up.

"Another empty chair," Gary said in monotone.

"Empty chairs at empty tables," Kirk said thoughtfully, staring at nothing in particular, recalling a line from *Les Misérables*.

"I don't know what that means," Gary said, then noticed the open logbook on the desk while he waited for Jim to reply, reached down and ran his fingers across the pages. "One of your dad's books?"

"What's up, Gary?" Kirk finally asked as the silence lingered heavily, in that all too familiar tone of voice that Gary had long ago learned to recognize as his friend's way of telling him to 'cut the small talk.'

Gary gazed at his friend and reminded himself that as the ship's acting captain, he had to have been under incredible pressure. How long had it been, he wondered, since he'd taken a break or gotten some rest—or eaten something? "Fighting Klingons always makes me hungry. I was on my way to the galley," he said. "If I go alone I'll have to sit with Ross and she'll bore me to death."

Kirk didn't say anything. Instead, he turned and stepped away, and probably for the first time in anyone else's presence, actually sat down at Captain Garrovick's desk and pulled the logbook closer.

"He sits."

Kirk gave him a brief glance, then picked up the stylus one more time.

"What the hell is that?" Mitchell frowned.

"Ship's logbook. It's an old ship's tradition," he elaborated. "The computer transcribes it afterwards."

"You might want to spare the computer the pain and anguish. I've seen your handwriting," Gary said as he reached down and touched a corner of the large bound book again to nudge the book out of the way so he could sit on the corner of the desk. No one else could have gotten away with doing that—but it was just them. Theirs was a friendship that reached far deeper than superior and subordinate. "You hear anything from Starfleet Medical? About Garrovick?"

Kirk shook his head. "They want to keep him a little longer."

"That's what they said last time," Gary said dismissively.

After a few more long moments of silence, Kirk finally dropped his gaze to the stylus in his hand and said, "I just found out they lost three more this morning." He said it as though he'd needed to tell someone in order to believe it.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Gary offered with all sincerity as he reached across the desk and rested a hand gently on his friend's shoulder.

"That makes an even two-hundred—for those keeping count," Kirk's voice dropped to a whisper. "It should be two hundred and one."

"You didn't put him in that hospital bed any more than you were responsible for the deaths of the others," Gary's voice rose firmly.

"Facts are facts," Kirk cut in sharply.

"That's right, and sooner or later you're going to have to face those facts, Jim," Gary came right back. "You've been dragging that big old bag of guilt around behind you ever since it happened. The official investigation concluded no one was to blame. You know how rare that is in Starfleet. They love to blame."

"Someone's always to blame," Kirk snapped obstinately before he could stop himself. Then he pointed out calmly and coldly, without a trace of emotion in his voice, "I should have fired. It's just that simple. I didn't. I froze."

Gary stood and walked around to the window and gazed out. "Stop feeling so damn sorry for yourself."

Kirk's eyebrows rose. This was bold, even for Gary.

"I ran into McCoy on my way here. He told me to tell you that."

"He did?" Kirk's eyebrows dropped thoughtfully.

"I know you, better than anyone else does, and I know that *even you know* you need to get past this."

Kirk looked at the stylus again. "To survive and hold on for so long just to die?" He set the stylus down and looked his friend in the eye for a few moments, then let out something between a breath and a sigh. "I'm glad you're here, Gary. I need someone I know around."

"I had a good thing going back on Exeter, I'll have you know. Ron Tracy was madder than hell at losing his best officer."

"His best officer?" Kirk half-smiled.

"I'm indispensable. Haven't you heard?"

"You want to go back?"

"God no. Tracy's a first-class tool," Gary suddenly changed his tune.

Kirk half-smiled. “What do you say behind *my* back?”

“I don’t. I say it to your face—although I get your backside and your face mixed up sometimes.”

Finally a relaxed atmosphere swept through. Gary could see his friend’s shoulders visibly relax.

“This is an almost entirely new crew, Gary. I don’t know anyone.”

“Now that’s something I can help you with—and me while I’m at it. No better place for a captain to get to know the crew than complaining how bad the food is in the galley.”

“I could use a bite,” Kirk admitted out loud.

Gary took a step back and turned toward the door. “Let’s go captain.”

Kirk stood up, turned off the lamp, and fell into step beside his friend. “Acting captain,” he amended as he led the way out of the office into the corridor.

“We intercepted a distress signal, by the way,” Gary mentioned as the door closed behind them.

Kirk stopped short and stared at his friend in shock. “You just now thought to tell me that?” he asked, perplexed at why Gary would bury the lead.

“Relax,” Gary said, trying hard to contain his grin as he stopped abruptly as well to avoid walking right into him. “The Excalibur responded almost immediately.”

Kirk hesitated for another moment, but when Gary started walking again, he fell into step with him. “Distress call from who?” he asked, not entirely certain if he was truly miffed at Gary or not. With all that was going on, any outside news—good or bad—was a pleasant distraction.

“One of our own. Novikov.”

“Novikov,” Kirk pondered. “Where?”

“Way out somewhere in the galactic arm-pit.”

"Novikov's a science ship. What's she doing way out there?"

"What are we doing way out here? What was that Klingon ship doing way out here for that matter?"

"The Klingons are massing forces for a major offensive?" Kirk answered with a question.

"I don't know—" Gary answered, not really interested as the lift doors swished open to admit them. They entered together and turned around to face the doors. "But I do have a theory about something else."

"What?"

Gary put a hand on his friend's shoulder for emphasis, and in a tone of voice meant to dramatize his revelation to the fullest, he proclaimed, "Lieutenant Ross is a Vulcan."

Kirk smirked and shook his head. Some things never changed. Gary still had an uncanny way of jumping from one subject to the next.

"No, really, go with me on this, huh?" Gary pressed.

"Deck five," Kirk said as he grabbed hold of the nearest control handle. Then, as the lift started moving, he addressed Gary's point. "What the hell makes you think that?"

"Lots of things—but for one, she's about as emotional as this elevator. She reminds me of that idiot that tried to can your ass back at the Academy—not to mention she kind of looks like him."

"Ross is hardly unemotional," Kirk found himself defending Ross before continuing with an afterthought as he recalled the mental image of her kneeling on the hanger deck with tears in her eyes.

"She's boring."

"You like her," Kirk smiled with a knowing look.

"Ross? She's about as interesting as an airlock. Yesterday? She started talking to me about coil emission levels. I tried to kill myself with my fork."

The elevator stopped after a few more seconds and the doors slid open again. Kirk smiled at him.

Gary stepped out ahead of him, then turned around and stopped Kirk with a gentle finger to the chest. "My friend, *you* and Ross would make a much better couple."

Kirk drew a breath to respond, but then his smile faded as the elevator doors almost shut and he put his hand out to keep them open so he could step out beside him. Then he had a second thought. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What? It means exactly what it means," Gary answered as he started to back away. "You and Ross…you're both..."

"What?" Kirk asked when Gary hesitated.

"Alike."

"Alike?" Kirk bellowed.

"Similar." Gary quickly amended as turned and strode into the galley, hoping to escape from the conversation he now realized it had been a mistake to start in the first place as he left Kirk behind, momentarily dumbfounded.

Suddenly, the real meaning behind Gary's words hit him. "You think I'm boring?" he asked somewhat louder than necessary as he followed Gary into the galley just in time so as not to allow the doors to close him off. Several pairs of eyes turned toward him.

"Conservative?" Gary tried another word as he strode over to one of the food dispensers, then offered one more as he began to program his meal. "I don't know. Predictable."

Kirk joined him and stared at him. "You think I'm boring." He shook his head and programmed his own meal. Seconds later, he lifted out a tray bearing a nice big bowl of steaming hot chicken soup and a large cup of coffee.

Gary nodded toward Kirk's tray with a sigh, "I rest my case." then walked off to find a table.

"I like chicken soup," Kirk pronounced louder than he had to. So much so in fact, that a crewman two dispensers over briefly glanced his way. Just not briefly enough. "Well I do," Kirk insisted, looking right at him. The crewman grabbed up his own tray and hurried away without offering the acting captain so much as a second glance.

He caught up with Gary as both walked with trays in hand. "Ross just isn't falling for your usual bullshit charm—and that intrigues you."

"Oh yeah, that's it all right," Gary answered sarcastically. "I'm intrigued."

"You like her," Kirk didn't let up.

"Now you're just being mean," Gary shot right back at him. "And you're one to talk about bullshit charm. I remember you back at the Academy."

"How was I back at the Academy?"

"I know the real you."

Kirk feigned innocence. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Yeah? What would Annie say if she knew how you were?"

"She does know. How do you think we ran into each other after so many years?"

"You didn't run into her. I did. I got you two back together—much to my chagrin." Gary's voice trailed off as both found themselves standing in front of a female crew member who had apparently been angling for the same table—a brunette with deep blue eyes.

"I'm sorry—" she started to back off apologetically.

"No—please—join us," Gary shifted into full-on charm mode. Kirk would have rather had the table to themselves, but the deal was done as she sat across from them.

Gary looked at the brunette and asked, "Pagano, was it?"

"That's right," the young woman answered, flashing her bright white smile.

"Ensign Pagano," He gestured toward Kirk, "meet Captain James T. Kirk. He's from Iowa, too, incidentally."

"You're from Iowa?"

"I was *born* in Iowa," Kirk quickly clarified. "I grew up everywhere else." He offered his hand to the young woman. "And it's *acting* captain," he corrected.

"Nice to meet you, sir," she said politely, flashing him that same white smile.

"Pagano transferred from the Constellation," Gary informed him helpfully.

Just then, Lieutenant Ross appeared beside their table, standing there holding her tray and wearing her ever-present deadpan expression. "Captain, Commander," she greeted in her always official sounding monotone. "May I join you?"

"Please do, Lieutenant," Kirk responded immediately and firmly, then gestured to the chair beside Gary.

"Thank you," she answered in return as she set her tray down and sat.

Gary glared at Kirk, who immediately turned his eyes to Pagano and started talking to her.

"I lived in Riverside until I was eleven."

"Council Bluffs," Pagano offered.

"My family used to go there every Christmas," Kirk smiled.

Faced with no other choice but to talk to Ross, Gary looked down at her tray in search of a topic for conversation, grinned when he spotted the small pile of something that looked like four inch long extra thin scallions, and asked, "What the heck is that, Ross? Crabgrass?"

"It's a Vulcan vegetable dish, actually," she informed him, sounding a lot like a deadpan, monotone teacher lecturing a high school science class.

"Vulcan, did you say?" He said loudly, then stole a glance out of the corner of his eye and caught Kirk's gaze before he just turned away and resumed talking to Pagano.

"Well it looks absolutely—delicious," Gary stated with as much sarcasm as one word could hold.

"I can program the dispenser for you if you'd like," Ross offered sincerely, apparently thinking that Gary was actually interested.

"No thanks," he told her with a chuckle. "I'll take the sharp stick in the eye."

Suddenly, the intra-ship hailing tone sounded, and the on-duty comms officer's voice over the ship's all-call immediately followed. "Bridge to Captain Kirk," it called.

Kirk felt as though every pair of eyes in the galley had fallen on him as he set his spoon down in his bowl. He smiled at Pagano. "Excuse me."

He stood up and headed straight toward the nearest wall-mounted comms panel. Passing another table, he felt the need to correct the oversight one more time. "Acting captain."

When he reached the panel, he slapped his fist down on the little white button and responded simply, "This is Kirk."

"Sir, you have a coded priority-one message from Starfleet Command."

"Pipe it to the skipper's office," he ordered. "I'll be there in five." He switched off the intercom and headed back to the table.

"Duty calls," he said as he picked up his tray. He glanced at Pagano and said, "Nice to have met you, Ensign," then headed off.

"Catch you later, Jim," Gary said to his back. Then he turned to Pagano, prepared with a plan-B alternative to certain death by conversation with Ross. "So… Pagano…", he began, but before he could get any further, she stood up and picked up her tray as well.

"I'm sorry. I have to get back, too," she shrugged sheepishly. "Nice to have met you."

"Yeah, sure," he acquiesced, clearly disappointed. "See you around."

He watched her walk off for a moment, then realized that his worst fear had come to pass. Only he and Ross remained and he locked gazes squarely with her, causing her to raise her eyebrows expectantly.

"Let me ask you something, Ross," he started. "Can you do this?" He raised his right hand and formed the two-fingered 'V' of the traditional Vulcan greeting.

CHAPTER 33

Message from a Ghost

A large scale medical emergency. A vital, last minute diplomatic mission. The breaking out of hostilities between the Federation and one of the other major space-faring powers. Any one of those circumstances would have warranted a coded priority-one transmission. Those were the kinds of things that level of official communication was normally reserved for. But this?

The last thing Kirk had expected as he retraced his steps back to the skipper's office was a personal call from Captain Garrovick. It had to be good news because he couldn't have gotten much worse. Was he returning to Farragut? Part of him felt a guilty sense of relief at the idea that the weight of the recent responsibility heaped on him following Tycho IV would lift.

He tapped on the old brass desk lamp and fell into in the chair just as as Garrovick's face flickered onto the comscreen. There was definite improvement in his appearance from the last time they'd spoken. He still looked extremely tired though, and somehow older.

"How are you feeling, Skipper?"

"You hear about Novikov?" Garrovick asked.

"Yes," Kirk returned. They'd served together long enough to dispense with the usual official banter.

"Klingon bastards."

"So it was the Klingons then?" Kirk hadn't known for sure.

"How soon do you think you can get here?" Garrovick asked.

"Earth? You mean turn the ship around?"

"No, just you," Garrovick clarified pretty adamantly. "Farragut can continue on."

Kirk set his coffee mug down, leaned closer to the screen, and lowered his voice. "What's this all about, Skipper?"

"We'll talk when you get here," Garrovick shut him down. Then his tone became even more serious as he added, "Listen, Jim, this entire thing has to be completely under the radar. You got me? As far as the crew is concerned, you're not even gone. Call in sick…whatever…and no records of any kind. Got it?"

Kirk drew a breath to acknowledge, but hesitated for a moment. He didn't particularly like the idea of leaving the crew in the dark. Then again, arguing with his skipper wasn't something he was quite prepared to do either, so he finally answered, "Understood, skipper." He had about a dozen more questions he would like to have answered, but he knew when it was time to shut up. Garrovick had been his C.O. since he graduated. They'd been to hell and back together. He trusted him implicitly.

"See you soon," Garrovick concluded so curtly that it hit Kirk oddly. Then his image flickered to static and dissolved to nothing.

"Computer, disengage privacy protocol," Kirk said.

"Privacy protocol disengaged," the automated voice verified.

Kirk sat back in his chair and gazed at the dark screen. What the hell was going on? The skipper looked good—far better than he expected him to. What was he so concerned about that he had to send a coded message? Charlie Garrovick didn't frighten easily. Hell, Charlie Garrovick didn't frighten at all. But something was spooking him. He started playing the entire Tycho IV catastrophe back in his mind, searching for clues, examining every detail that he could remember from every possible angle, but then the office door chime sounded, interrupting him.

"Come," he called out. Gary, no doubt.

The door slid aside with a swish and sure enough, Gary stood in the doorway. He felt a sense of deja-vu.

"You took off and stranded me. What's up?" he asked. Then he stepped inside, allowing the door to close behind him.

"The skipper," Kirk told him, gesturing toward the dark commscreen as he reached for his coffee, answering the question he knew Gary was most certainly going to ask him if he had to. The coffee had gone cold. He set it down.

"He coming back?"

"I'm going there, actually," Kirk answered matter-of-factly.

"Why?" Gary asked, and when no response came, "When?"

Kirk fingered at his coffee cup, then answered, "Right away—and it's just me. Farragut is to continue with the Cestus mission as scheduled. You're in charge."

"Think that's wise, Jim? Considering our earlier run-in with the Klingons?"

"Skipper's orders. I may or may not be back onboard by the time you're done."

"Is it just me or is a lot about all this that's kind of strange?"

Kirk let Gary's words vanish into a few moments of silence. "I'll take one of our long-range shuttles." Kirk realized the instant he said it that that was going to open a whole new can of worms with Gary, but there it was.

"I thought Starfleet grounded those things months ago—some sort of design flaw."

Kirk realized that it wasn't going to be easy to keep Gary totally in the dark.

"Computer, re-engage privacy protocol."

"Privacy protocol engaged," the computer confirmed, causing Gary to raise his eyebrows. He knew Gary knew the difference between privacy protocol and security protocol. Privacy was completely off-the-record—as if nothing ever happened. Kirk gazed at his best friend, realizing that nothing he said was going to completely satisfy him. For all his carefree nature and joking around, Gary had a suspicious side, and when something bothered him, he didn't let it go.

"In half an hour I want you to conduct a code-one emergency drill—full evac to the saucer section and hold for twenty minutes before stand-down. Make it a full sep scenario and block all systems' access to the engineering hull. That'll allow me to get off the ship unseen. If the crew starts asking questions when no one sees me later, I'm simply away on ship's business. Nothing else."

"Shouldn't be too hard. I don't know anything else," Gary came back with just a hint of resign.

"Sorry to be so cryptic."

The moments of lingering silence that peppered their conversation felt odd and out of place between old friends, but Gary could be strong enough to let them pass and be forgotten.

"Well," he said, sensing that that conversation had come to a close, "I'll go tell Ross to prep a long-range shuttle for no apparent reason at all." He stood up and headed for the door, then turned back for a moment to add, "Does this make me the acting-acting skipper?" Then he half-smiled, turned and continued on out, leaving Kirk staring distantly.

CHAPTER 34

Aavion

His square jaw clenched tight, his eyes glued on Chancellor Gast's formidable image on the communication display, Commander Prath stood tall before one of the smaller consoles on his dimly lit bridge of the battlecruiser *Aavion*.

Despite the various honors and rewards that his own impressive service record had afforded him, he couldn't help but be humbled as he stared at the myriad of glistening medals and campaign badges that adorned the former general's cloak. Each one told its own story of glorious battle—of conquest and victory. While it was true that some of them had been handed down by Chancellors from generations past, as was the ancient custom, it was also true that Gast had earned the majority of them himself, and that they had only been added to the cloak after he completed the Rite of Succession and became Chancellor.

"Cain must have had a ship waiting for him nearby," Prath explained. "We have traced a long range transporter signature from the Novikov. It appeared to be directed toward the third planet in the Cestus system."

Gast seemed uninterested in the mechanics of Cain's escape—only in the fact that he had. "He must have a ship waiting on Cestus. Set course there immediately and stop him. I will activate our assets on Earth."

Prath recoiled slightly and ground his teeth together and threatened to tear the flesh around his gums. He was not at all happy with that order, which he saw as nothing more than an order to stay out of the way. Gast had been his surrogate father and his mentor for many years. He'd served him faithfully and with honor. He didn't deserve to be pushed aside that way. But he knew better than to argue with

the Chancellor of the Empire. "As you command, Excellency," he reluctantly responded.

The Chancellor nodded ever so slightly, almost as if he'd been testing Prath to see how he would respond to such a distasteful order. If that was in fact the case, Prath surmised, then his response had apparently pleased his mentor.

Gast leaned in a little closer to the monitor and glared at him. "Cain's escape is unexpected. If he should succeed in revealing what he knows, your efforts to avenge your father's murder could be in jeopardy."

"He will not succeed, Excellency," Prath assured him, his deeply seeded anger rising inside him—a bloodlust for revenge whose fire had grown continuously over all the years since his father's betrayal and murder.

"You will see it is so," Gast said, then followed in his deep monotone of authority, "Qapla."

Prath drew a sharp breath, then clenched his jaw so tightly that his lips began to quiver as he slowly exhaled, growling under his breath. Then he slapped his fist to his chest and shouted, "Qapla'!"

As the screen went dark, Prath slowly lowered his still clenched fist to his side and spun around to his tactical officer.

"Full speed for Cestus III!" he commanded his helm officer.

CHAPTER 35

Earth

Inside the long passenger cabin of empty rows of seats, Jim Kirk sat alone as a bright concerto of parallel shafts of brilliant sunlight poured in through the starboard side windows of the passenger compartment and swept across the seats on both sides of the aisle as the vessel turned. He'd left his long-range shuttle on *Yorktown* and had beamed to Stardock One and caught the first transport for Earth.

The sunlight felt warm on his face as he leaned sideways to peer out through the window beside his seat. He marveled as he gazed out on the breathtaking view of Mother Earth's beautiful, gently curved, hazy blue horizon as the transport flew above western Europe's glowing city lights, sparkling like diamonds on deep blue-black velvet as they slipped farther from the sun's golden brilliance and plunged deeper into the dark blanket of night.

He hadn't laid his eyes on the blue and white globe of home in almost three years, and her incredible beauty instantly made the last several days worthwhile. On the one hand, the voyage to rendezvous with *Yorktown* had given him time to think—maybe too much—about everything that had happened in recent months. He wasn't any closer to coming to terms with the Tycho disaster, or what he'd done, or hadn't done. Commanding a ship of the line had consumed his entire life since entering the academy. But was he really ready? Charlie Garrovick had become not only his teacher, but a friend.

He looked up as the shuttle passed under one of Stardock One's docking outriggers—most likely the one they'd just departed—and caught a quick glimpse of the underside of the starship that had brought him home. The *Yorktown*, commanded by Captain Robin Archer. Now there was an impressive command officer. The

granddaughter of the late Admiral Jonathan Archer, Robin Archer had made quite a name for herself as Captain Christopher Pike's X.O. on the *Enterprise*. Stories of her daring rescue of Pike and his trapped away team on Rigel VII were already legend in the halls of Starfleet, and now she'd been rewarded with a ship of her own. In what little face time with her he'd been afforded, he'd found her to be quite a capable commanding officer, though somewhat more aloof and unapproachable than most. They had one thing in common. He and Archer were both children of heroic figures whose accomplishments they couldn't possibly live up to. Beyond that, though, she was a bit of a mystery.

He craned his neck and squinted against the sunlight, trying to see past the huge circular center hub and get a look at the other outriggers. *Enterprise* had just been outfitted for her next five year mission and was supposed to be home from her trial runs.

A heavy cruiser. Constitution class, in fact. One of *Farragut's* sister ships. Nothing else in the fleet had quite that same pattern of running lights.

The shuttle veered to the left to give her plenty of room, but he easily made out the registry number painted beneath her primary hull. NCC-1701. *Enterprise*—Chris Pike's ship—fresh out of space dock and ready for her next five-year mission of exploration under his command. She was probably on her way to Stardock One.

Captain Pike had commanded her previous five-year mission as well, but he wasn't the first commanding officer she had known. That honor had fallen to then Captain Robert April, who'd commanded her for a total of seven years, including her unusually long shakedown trials, before his retirement in 2250. Pike, his longtime X.O., had slid easily into the captain's chair after that.

As long as he lived, Kirk would never forget Captain April. He'd been there, in command of *Enterprise* for her maiden voyage—in command of the whole Starfleet contingent—when his father was killed at Rigel VII—no one called it Gastillion anymore, not since the Klingons had taken it over. Not since the war. April hadn't been able to attend his father's funeral service aboard *Farragut*—but he'd visited their home once in Gettysburg not long afterwards and had been very kind to

his family for those few days he'd been able to stay. If Cain had become a sort of surrogate father to him, then April had become something of an uncle. He'd even written an official letter of recommendation for him to attach to his application to Tarsus Academy. That letter had guaranteed his admittance.

Stardock One disappeared beyond the top edge of his window, so he looked down at the Earth again.

Still in daylight, Greenland lived up to its name as its forest-covered wedge drifted into view from beyond the distant horizon far to the north. He marveled at its deep emerald beauty. He found it hard to believe that over eighty percent of it had been covered by a sheet of glacial ice only two short centuries ago, back before the 'long summer.' The glaciated regions of Earth's past had all but melted away. The only significant area of ice and snow remaining anywhere on Earth was in Antarctica's most southern polar region.

Snow. It made him think of his middle school days at Tarsus Academy. Having run across a couple of his father's *Harry Potter* novels on his grandfather's bookshelf, he always imagined that the snow-covered stone buildings of Tarsus Academy must have looked a lot like Hogwarts. Surely those days were the best and worst of times. His idyllic school days had been epically interrupted by Governor Kodos—or 'Kodos the executioner' as he became known after the massacre.

Many of his Academy friends perished in that catastrophe. When he realized what was happening, he collected together and escaped with as many of his classmates as he could and led them up into the mountains to the caves of Kelly's Peak where they huddled together in a blinding blizzard waiting for help to arrive. Now there he'd done something. He'd saved the lives of twenty of his classmates. Of course many more perished at the hands of Kodos' death squads, including scores more colonists in the valley below. It was the end of an era. Tarsus Colony and the Academy were closed permanently and abandoned to their wintery desolation on a far off planet.

As Greenland passed out of view and the east coast of North America approached, Kirk's eyes were drawn to a bright sheen of westerly sunlight as it glinted off the Hudson Sea—the large inland sea that covered the vast area of

North America where the five Great Lakes had once been. He recalled his grade-school history, much of which he learned while at TA. The Hudson Sea was only one of several massive projects initiated in the late twenty-first century intended to mitigate ocean levels that were rising due to the great melt and inundating coastlines around the world,. Ocean water had been channeled to huge areas of arid wastelands, low-lying flood plains and other regions that had once been covered by water in eons past.

His thoughts shifted back to Garrovick's cryptic message. What could be bothering him so much that he'd felt it necessary to order his X.O. all the way back to Earth? And why all the cloak and dagger secrecy and vessel-hopping? He'd left *Farragut* on faith alone, without even knowing the identity of the ship he was to rendezvous with. It seemed awfully strange to him that he'd had to leave one Starfleet heavy cruiser and rendezvous with another—just to head back to Earth.

Then there was that odd run-in with the Klingons. What the hell were they doing way out there?

Cestus Outpost was one of several secret Federation listening posts in operation along a rather complicated border zone between the Klingon Empire and the Federation. The only civilization within a thousand kilometers of it—assuming the term 'civilization' was used loosely enough—was Naska Starport. Naska was a sort of mid-way transfer point for commerce between planets on both sides of the disputed zone. It was also the central hub for all illegal activity in the entire sector. He and Gary had gone there a few years ago because Gary had had some sort of deal going on with a business acquaintance of his—something he was supposed to 'make a killing at', as Gary had put it. All Kirk could remember was that the deal, whatever it had been, had never happened…and that the place had been God-awfully cold—and with lots of snow.

Gary was a bit of a hustler in his Academy days. He always had something going on on the side and was generally lucky he graduated. He met Leonard on his first day at the Academy, while Gary became his roommate when he reunited with him during his sophomore year. The three were often found together, but truthfully, though, McCoy put up with Gary, who was an acquired taste, and on more

than one occasion told Gary where he could shove it. Kirk was all but certain that if they didn't have him in common, they would never associate with each other. Strange. He, Gary, Leonard and Annie kind of reminded him of his time at Tarsus Academy—the good times—where he had befriended another group of "usual suspects." There was Kara, a pretty but tough tom-boy who was half-Chinese and half Klingon, and who got into more fights than he did. There was Zik—pronounced Zeke—who was also of a mixed heritage—half Somalian and half Vulcan, who was the most serious person he'd ever met up to that point. Zik was guilty by association when the group got caught sneaking into the dining hall one midnight. That was when headmaster Lockwood first referred to them as "the usual suspects" and it stuck. Then there was little Kevin Riley, a homely boy who somehow ended up with "the usual suspects" because his father was the librarian at TA. Kirk, when he wasn't cavorting with Kara and Zik, was in the library where they had an impressive collection of real books…

Suddenly a darkness overcame him. Those were the good times. Good times with good friends who surely would have been with him for the rest of his life—taking their place alongside Gary and Annie. But it was a moment that could not last. Zik and Kara were gone. Victims of Kodos' culling. Of "the usual suspects", only he and Kevin Riley remained. Both had witnessed the horrors of Kodos' atrocities and lived…

He was doing it again—letting his mind wander in places it shouldn't. Long trips alone were the bane of his existence. Unlike so many, he was never able to sleep, so the hours of travel always dragged by.

With the mighty Starship *Enterprise* having sailed out of view, another distant bright spot of reflected sunlight glinted sharply on the soft fuzzy blue blanket of air. Starfleet Headquarters, he realized without a doubt. It was the only thing in orbit big enough to reflect so brightly at that distance. It occurred to him at that moment that in the three years since he'd graduated from the Academy, he'd never seen any of Starfleet's giant stations up close from the outside before. He's seen pictures, of course, but whenever *Farragut* had been in the vicinity of one of them, he'd always been too preoccupied to be able to just stop whatever he was doing and look out a window.

Within minutes the shuttle had slowed and the small, and what had been just a speck of light had enlarged to reveal a massive oval, bathed in warm, brilliant sunlight on one side, with the other in pitch dark silhouette, where a thousand pinpoints of light glowed from the windows.

Thicker in the center than along the outer edges, grayish-silvery in color, the massive station looked very much like a gigantic version of the typical flying saucer people had often reported sighting in the skies of a rather paranoid twentieth-century Earth.

Starfleet Headquarters was immense—more than two and a half kilometers in diameter, and had six spherical starship berths that circled the main hull's lateral circumference along the outer deflector shield generator ring. Kirk suspected that the entire Stardock One he just left moments ago could easily fit inside the main section. The berths themselves were huge as well. Each one was capable of housing up to three starship-sized vessels with room to spare. Heavy phaser turrets mounted on each one ensured vessels would be kept quite safe. Kirk felt a slight momentary dip in the artificial gravity as the shuttle began to descend into the atmosphere, through a heavy cloud cover, and angled toward the west coast of Northern California.

He sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. His left hand felt the warmth of the sunlight burning through the window. Just a few more minutes.

Those minutes passed quickly, and as the familiar contours of the San Francisco Bay area revealed themselves below, he felt the shuttle begin to turn ever so slowly, then quickly descend and angle in toward Starfleet Command's sprawling upper landing platform, which was open on the end facing the bay. Moments later it came to rest upon one of the platform's docking jetty's with a single, barely perceivable bump. He stood up and started toward the door.

"Passengers may now disboard," the shuttle's computer announced over the P.A. as the dual-airlock hatch hissed and parted and the lower portion dropping outward to become a ramp. The welcome aroma of fresh, cool, unprocessed air laced with hints of fragrances that he always recognized but could never name surrounded him as he stepped out into the mid-morning sun and down the ramp to

the platform floor and almost immediately bumped into someone. Uniformed Starfleet personnel and civilians alike crowded the platform as they hurried about, boarding and disembarking from the various shuttles that were almost constantly coming and going.

Things were a lot different than they had been the last time he was there—a lot busier.

Maneuvering through the heavy human traffic—well, mostly human anyway—he made his way over to the platform's edge, rested his elbows on the railing, and looked down on literally hundreds of more people crowding the main concourse below, which had been decorated for the holidays with colorfully trimmed Christmas trees and wreaths, seven-candle menorahs, kinaras, a myriad of twinkling colored lights, and a number of other items whose significances and origins he was clueless about. He'd heard Starfleet Academy was busy these days with appointments reaching an all-time high, but he'd never imagined things would get this busy. Then again, with the upgrading and overhauling of the fleet that was going on—the major boost in the number of personnel assigned to the fleet's Constitution-class starships that was coming, jumping from just over two-hundred to about four-hundred thirty, was a prime example of that—a lot of people had a lot of things to do.

Where the hell were four-hundred thirty personnel going to sleep?

His thoughts drifted back once more to the *Constitution* he'd visited as a child in Boston. Crewmen aboard ships of that era had had to do something called 'hot-bunking'. They'd actually had to share the very bed they slept in with a crewmate who worked a different shift. Fortunately, Starfleet recognized the psychological needs for crewmembers to have at least a minimum amount of personal space during long voyages about the cosmos, and even the lowest crew members were only two-to-a-room with individual beds.

His mind was still wandering. Captain Garrovick was waiting. Hopefully he'd show improvement.

He stopped short when his eyes fell on a tall, slender, and very attractive woman in command gold uniform standing not too far away, looking at him with

a laser-like gaze and a hesitant smile, her golden hair blowing gently in the cool December breeze. He smiled at the sight of her, noted the commander's bands around her cuffs, and eagerly approached her.

"Look at you," she said as she smiled at him.

"Look at you," he said as he drew closer and resisted the urge to embrace her.

"Captain Kirk," she said as they stood facing each other in the bustle of people.

"Acting Captain," he responded.

Her eyes were as brilliantly aquamarine as ever, but there was something about them.

Finally it was she who took him into her arms and they embraced for a long time, and in contrast with her tone, she seemed to hold onto him with all her strength. "Missed you. I'm glad you're back, Jim," she spoke in a near whisper into his ear.

Both finally relaxed and parted to lock gazes on each other. "Missed you too—but I'll come back more often if it means a welcome like that," he joked. He looked again into those big aquamarine eyes that he remembered from their childhood days of climbing trees together. In the last few years, they'd reconnected and had grown closer, spending whatever time they could together whenever and wherever they could.

"So much for all the cloak and dagger. Who told you I was coming? Charlie?" he asked.

Confusion suddenly filled Annie's eyes…enough so that it unnerved him. Her tone, while friendly enough, betrayed a certain hesitation—a certain distance that he couldn't remember ever hearing in it before. At least, not when she was talking to him.

"He told you I was coming in, right? Charlie did? Annie?"

"Jim…" She hesitated for a moment, clearly uncomfortable, but finally managed to get the words out. "Charlie's dead. I thought you knew."

Her words hit him like bricks dropped onto his chest. His vision narrowed as a feeling of vertigo washed over him. Captain Garrovick was dead? And Annie thought he already knew it? "What?" he asked quietly, almost under his breath, which was all he could manage.

"He died several nights ago in his room at Starfleet Medical. I thought you knew."

"No," he told her, shaking his head.

"Jim, I'm so sorry." She was clearly just as affected as she was, and she reached once again and took him into her arms.

CHAPTER 36

Admiral T'Pol

One of the founding pillars of the Federation, Admiral T'Pol was the last person he expected to be talking to. She was still very much the striking woman he'd seen at his father's funeral years ago, albeit she had streaks of gray in her hair now. But not in his most creative imagination could he have conjured up the tall tale he was hearing from her.

He stood in silence before her huge bay window in her office, his jaw clenched, his hands folded tightly behind his back, and gazed out over the spectacular panoramic view of San Francisco Harbor and the Golden Gate Bridge—which he barely noticed because what she'd just said had shaken him profoundly.

Charlie Garrovick had not just died—*he had been murdered*. What's more, the killer was still at large. But that's not what chilled him to the bone. What made the hairs on his head and arms stand on end was finding out that the message he received from Garrovick had been sent hours after he was dead. Hearing T'Pol reveal this had given him what he could only describe as an out-of-body experience. Suddenly he'd felt like he was just an observer watching his own life play out in front of him in some sort of warped fiction. The Admiral's words were so chilling, in fact, that he'd stood up and walked to the window to recompose himself. The idea that people he didn't even know had manipulated him for mysterious reasons left him feeling violated at his core.

"Who sent the message?" Kirk's voice came a little raspy. His throat was dry. When he heard nothing, he turned to lock gazes with her.

T'Pol studied him for a few moments, then leaned forward and touched a control on her desk.

"Computer, privacy protocol." Her command caught him momentarily by surprise, and as soon as she uttered the words, a shutter-like covering began to deploy downward over the panoramic window, and she waited patiently until it locked into place.

"Privacy protocol engaged," the computer voice announced.

"Kirk, I'm about to reveal things to you that must not go beyond this room. Is this clear?"

His eyes were still fastened on her. "Yes, of course." His finally responded. His voice sounded almost as monotone as her's.

"Farragut was not ordered to Tycho IV."

Another one. Blow-by-blow, her rapid-fire epic revelations were coming faster than he could absorb them.

"I saw those orders—personally," he objected.

"Like the message to you from Captain Garrovick that brought you here, the orders to Tycho IV were fabricated as well."

"Why?"

"They were trying to conceal Captain Garrovick's death as just one among the many killed in the catastrophe. When they failed at Tycho, they tried again here and succeeded."

Her seemingly emotionless tone as she talked about the deaths of almost an entire crew began to annoy him. "Do you know how that sounds? Sending an entire starship—sending over two-hundred people to their deaths—just to kill one person?"

She offered nothing in response as Kirk stood there.

"Why the message to me then? Why go to all that effort to bring me back here?"

"To kill you."

"Me?" Kirk raised his voice.

"They must believe you are involved as well."

"Involved with *what?*" Kirk snapped in frustration. "And *they?* They *who?* Does this have to do with the Klingons blaming my father for Arkanon's death?"

T'Pol seemed hesitant. "It is not an altogether unlikely conclusion."

"But Garrovick was nobody—I mean he was there at the summit—but he was just a first officer." Then he fell silent and almost whispered. "On Farragut."

"And now they're after you."

Her last words seemed to echo. Suddenly, recent events began replaying rapidly in Kirk's mind, but with new meaning. Suddenly all the guilt he'd been torturing himself with—for not acting quickly enough to stop the cloud creature when it attacked—all that paled in comparison to the revelation that over two-hundred of the Farragut crew died in an attack meant to kill him.

"When did you know the message was fabricated?"

"As soon as we intercepted and decrypted it."

"And that was when?"

"Just before you received it."

"You knew and you didn't warn me?" Then something else dawned on him. "You used me as bait."

"You were our only remaining lead after they killed Captain Garrovick. If we warned you, the conspirators would have been alerted as well and we would lose any opportunity to catch them."

"So the short answer is yes." He was clearly annoyed.

"Whether you were here or aboard Farragut was irrelevant. At least here we can protect you."

"So none of this is related to the Klingons and their revenge against me and my family?"

"There is only one Klingon seeking to avenge himself upon you. Everything that has happened over the last few days, while tragic, is just one small part of a much larger conspiracy that began long before the summit that killed your father and Arkanon. Powerful interests on many sides have long colluded to propel the Federation and the Klingons into war. The summit was a danger to their plans."

"That tired theory?" Kirk had heard more than his share of the many conspiracy theories that had arisen following the deaths of Arkanon and his father at the summit. In the end, though, the only story that really mattered was the one that blamed his father for it all—the story the Klingons believed—the story Prath, the son of Arkanon believed and had vowed a blood oath of revenge against his entire family.

"And Garrovick was a part of all this?"

"He and many others."

"You all are something else," Kirk rasped in frustration. "And I still don't know how I got caught up in all this."

"Kirk, at this point, the less you know, the better."

"Really?" He met her cold, emotionless gaze again. Vulcans had a way of being distant and cold, making many not to want to be around them, which was probably why Annie had left without a word after she delivered him.

"Admiral T'Pol?" a voice broke over the intercom.

Without taking her eyes off Kirk, the admiral reached out with a practiced hand and tapped the button to open the channel. "T'Pol," she responded.

"Admiral, Ambassador Sarek is here."

"Thank you," T'Pol switched off the intercom, then turned back to him. "We will have to continue this later, Kirk."

Kirk felt as though there was much unfinished business, but after a breath, relented. “Fine.”

“Someone will be in contact with you.”

Vulcans were not known for long good-byes, so without another word, he turned and headed for the door, then turned back with a worried expression on his face.

“I’m supposed to visit my mother—”

“We have people watching her,” T’Pol offered. “She is safe.”

“Like Charlie Garrovick was safe?”

“She will be safe.” There was a firm finality that resonated in her voice. It was enough.

CHAPTER 37

Winona Kirk

Familiar seasonal aromas carried on the chilly mid-December air stirred his olfactory senses, including the sharp tinge of a wood fire, as he walked up the dirt path, past the barn toward the house. It was just short of noon in chilly Gettysburg, but the sun had already starting descending in the sky, casting long, angular beams through the bare branches of the trees. Fallen dry, leathery leaves scratched and skittered off of and crunched beneath his shoes with each step. He caught a momentary glimpse of one particular tree a short ways off and a smile creased his face as he thought of Annie and their days climbing that tree.

The sunlight felt warm as long as it blazed on his back, but it was fleeting, because as soon as the shadows fell, the instant coolness that replaced it reminded him winter was here.

His mother was wearing a thick medium gray sweater with a large fold-down collar he knew well. It had made an appearance every winter for as long as he could remember. Her arms and hands felt warm through his shirt as she embraced him tightly just inside the doorway, and the fibers of the wool itched his cheek as he rested his face on her shoulder. The comforting smell of that old sweater brought on a rush of memories, but most of all, it said mom.

Once inside, just like many times he'd come home before, everything seemed smaller. The familiar smells, the furniture, mementos accumulated over a lifetime—even the creaks of the floor in places—the way the outside sounded inside—everything embraced him. The unsettling events of the last few days melted away. He was home.

No sooner had they finished hugging, that she'd asked him to help her carry some things to the barn.

Actually 'barn' wasn't a barn anymore. On the outside it still resembled his grandfather's horse barn that he remembered from his childhood, but rustic it was no longer. The outside wood had been restored and repainted. The inside had been gutted, renovated, and converted into an office where she did her writing. The horses were long gone. Blackie had lived to a ripe old age of sixteen, and until a couple years ago, had accompanied her to the office daily and spent most hours of his senior years sleeping on the "doggie bed" she put by the window for him while she wrote.

There were no wooden stalls, and the dirt and sawdust floor were replaced by a refined roomy artist's studio with finished pine hardwood flooring. It was a bright yet cozy space, lit naturally during the day by sunlight through the two large skylights in the vaulted ceiling where the loft used to be. There was also a large antique wood stove—most likely acquired locally, Gettysburg being the historical nexus it was.

She told him she did her best writing in the morning. She got up early, rain or shine, winter or summer, light or dark—and she'd head down the path carrying her freshly brewed mug of coffee. She'd really come into her own in the years since losing George. She never remarried—well that wasn't really that strange in an age when people rarely got married anymore anyway. She was on her own path now and she was content.

As the pale gray afternoon clouds rolled in to obscure the sun, they'd adjourned back to the house for a late lunch of sandwiches. James stood quietly in front of the old stone fireplace that he knew so well, warming his hands and watching the flickering orange-yellow flames dance around the crackling logs. It was comforting considering the epic scope of recent events.

A lot of family history here. He was glad that his mother had decided to keep the house. After his father's death, followed so soon by grandpa Ty's passing, she'd decided to stay, even if to be by herself most of the time. Sam, angry and disillusioned with anything even remotely connected to Starfleet, had withdrawn in pro-

test from the Academy and enrolled in the Federation Science Institute. He rarely came home. So with Sam gone and him off attending Tarsus Academy, it was just her. He felt a twinge of guilt over that, but she was happy in her creative solace. She was teaching a writing course at Gettysburg College, something his father always used to tell her she should do. He'd be happy to know this.

Through his shirt he felt the sharp prickly tips of a cluster of pine tree needles against his back. He turned around to look at the deep green Virginia Pine centered within the large bay window that looked out over the porch and the cobalt blue of twilight.

Populated with hundreds of pin-point white holographic lights that glowed steadily like stars, it reminded him of outer space—or maybe a massive cone-shaped space station. Randomly spaced trinkets and other seasonal mementos and ornaments decorated the tree. He recognized all of them. Some were crude and hand-made by he and Sam when they were young boys, and some were finely crafted. Each had a story. Each was bookmarks—a moment in the family timeline—at least up to a point—the Christmas after George's death. That particular Christmas everyone felt obliged to hold fast to family tradition even in the darkest of times. After that, Christmases had come and gone without much celebration, and no tree had made an appearance since. He kind of wondered why this one of all Christmases—then he remembered Sam's children—her grandchildren. It was for them.

Somewhere outside, high above in the cold December twilight sky, the sharp honking of hundreds of Canadian Geese flying overhead rose in volume to a crescendo, then faded into the distance as they headed toward their nightly roost.

His sense-memory was fully engaged. It was nice to smell the alpine scent inside once again. He ran his open palm back and forth over the prickly needles at the end of one branch. One of the tiny white holographic lights seemed to pass through his hand to reappear on the other side. His fingertips inadvertently tapped one of many crystalline pearly white globes, making a high pitched tinking sound as it swung back and forth a couple times before settling.

Seeing the tree after all those years was like opening a time capsule. His eyes fell on a flat shiny silver cut-out horse with silvery wings spread in flight dangled alone that turned slowly back and forth on its thread. Pegasus, the winged horse of ancient Greek mythology. His father had given it to his mother sometime before he was born. He remembered what his father used to say—that he'd be home when Pegasus flew toward the Moon. Briefly he noted that the tiny winged horse was pointed in no particular direction—and that there was no Moon in the overcast sky outside.

His gaze fell on another ornament he recognized—his tiny toy U.S.S. Kelvin model—hanging beside a shiny blue globe ornament frosted white with a pattern of snowflakes. He picked it off the branch and was surprised at how small it was and how light and fragile it felt. Time and fingerprints had tarnished its luster. He smiled as he found himself maneuvering it around the blue ornament as though it were orbiting some distant planet—something he used to do as a child as he sat under the tree.

Space, the final frontier. For as long as he could remember, that was where he wanted to be. He wanted to be like his father. The irony of life.

Suddenly he spotted something on the mantle. At the end of several books propped up by a heavy spherical bookend. He reached and pulled it out. He knew it right away by its blue, white and red hard cover. "A Tale of Two Cities." The book he'd told his father he would read before he returned from that fateful summit. He finally did read it, and then lost track of it. It was nice to see again. He ran his fingers over the familiar texture of the cover, flipped it open, flipped a page or two, then closed it.

"Sam and Aurelan helped me put the tree up when they were here for Thanksgiving," his mother's voice brought him back to the present as she returned from the kitchen carrying a small tray on which two slightly oversized steaming mugs rested. He'd known exactly what she was preparing long before she brought it in, of course. Back when they still lived in Iowa and would travel to Gettysburg to visit Grandpa Ty at Christmas, the familiar sweet smell of cinnamon-apple cider warming in the kitchen had permeated the house. Grandpa would have stocked

up a generous reserve of Kirk's Apple Cider pressed from the fall harvest, and hot or chilled, he could already taste the unique flavor forever locked in his sense-memory.

"Grandma's supposed to have a Christmas tree, you know," she concluded as she sat down.

"Little Nicky must be what? Close to seven now?" he pondered out loud. He felt bad for not knowing the details of his brother's family. He recalled the book in his hand. "Can I take this with me?"

"It's yours, why not?"

She set the tray on the round pine end table that sat between the matched pair of antique Victorian-style chairs that faced the fireplace.

"It's kind of nice to have a tree again," she said as she half-smiled, her gaze studying the tree.

"It is," James agreed as he stepped forward and sat down in the other chair beside her, resting the book on his lap. He picked up his mug, which felt warm to the touch, blowing slightly on it as the rim touched his lips, then took a short sip, then rested it on the book.

"It has," her gaze refocused lightyears beyond the tree as she became silent. He knew what she was thinking about because he was too.

"So what's your latest writing project?" he decided to lighten things up.

"Oh just a little idea I had way back. I'll show it to you when I'm a little further along. I think it's something you'll get a kick out of."

She brushed her hands down over her sweater to smooth a large fold and changed the subject. "It sure is cold out there tonight," she said. "They even say we might actually see a little snow this year."

"Well, after a hundred and fifty years I guess the odds are with us," he said as he rested his mug on his knee.

"I'll have you know that's the genuine article you're drinking," she enlightened him. "I told Bob he could send his harvesting drones into the orchards and take whatever he wanted."

"Kirk's Apple Cider," he said thoughtfully. "You thinking about reviving the business?"

"That's all on Bob. I just told him to send me a batch every year and he could use the label."

He leaned forward in his chair and reached out toward the iron poker in the bronze fireplace tool stand. His fingertips tapped the metal, but what he wrapped his hand around didn't feel much like the poker. He lifted it out of the stand. It was his father's antique Civil War Union military officer's sabre. He sat back in his chair to look at it, surprised to have found it.

"Cain left that when he dropped that by on his way through last spring," his mother told him as he grasped the ornate hilt and drew the saber part-way from its scabbard. The untarnished steel blade glistened in the firelight, "I keep meaning to find a place to mount it. Maybe over the fireplace."

"Dad used to display it on his cabin wall when he commanded the Farragut. I wondered what had happened to it."

He carefully slid the saber back into its scabbard, then put it back in the stand and grabbed the poker and prodded a stubborn piece of smoldering log that seemed reluctant to ignite, shifting the others onto the andirons and prompted a burst of sparks up the flue and a brief cascade of hot orange embers to the stone hearth below, one of which bounced out onto the outer hearth and rested there, glowing defiantly. He pushed it back into the fireplace, then returned the poker to the stand and sat back.

He picked his mug up again and as his hands cradled the warmth radiating through the mug, he took another sip. This time he savored the taste with a slow swish before swallowing.

"Sam was upset when I told him Cain stopped by," she reprised.

"Sam needs to get past it," he said, beginning an all too familiar refrain. "He knows Cain wasn't responsible for what happened."

"I was glad he stopped in. I finally got him to part with some stories of his days with George. Gave me some new ideas for my writing."

"Speaking of Cain," Kirk said, "looks like he might be right after all. I may actually be getting command of the old rust bucket. There's your title. Star trekking on the old rustbucket." He patted his old book in his lap for emphasis.

"I heard about Charlie," she offered after a few moments. "Horrible what happened to you all out there. Cain told me all about it." She studied him as he gazed relentlessly into the bright fingers of the flames.

"I won't lie and say it hasn't been rough," he admitted.

"Cain told me you got Gary transferred over." She fell silent for a moment and reflected. "He's a good friend. That's something you've always had—the gift of making and keeping good friends. You're like your father that way."

James gazed over at his mother again. Even now, fourteen years later, she was still thinking of his father.

"I don't know why he's more on my mind so much this year." She reflected, then her own gaze shifted to the flames as she quietly added, "He was a good man. He was a good man and it was his undoing." Both fell silent to the hiss and crackle of the fire.

"I always knew I was going to lose him, you know? It's terrible to admit after all this time and I can't explain it. But at the time it was just something I felt deep down. Something inevitable. I remember the first time I felt it. Out in the middle of nowhere on the Kelvin. You were due anyway and for some odd reason I just kept getting this horrible feeling that somehow I was going to lose him that day we encountered that lightning storm thing. But then—nothing happened." She smiled and put a hand on his. "And thankfully you waited to be born until we got back to Iowa. There's something to be said about being born on solid ground. One should only work in outer space."

James picked up on her unsaid meaning. "Don't worry, Mom," he said. "Being a hero isn't part of my plan. Not much of a market for heroes anymore."

One of the logs hissed, then shifted and slid down off the pile, sending another small plume of bright orange sparks swirling up the flue. "Well, on that note," He set down his mug and stood up, "I'd better get going." He started toward the front door. "I'm told Annie I'd take her to Les Mis tonight."

"Good for you," his mother commented as she stood up and followed him. "I always liked her, you know." Then, as she watched her son take his light, Starfleet-issue jacket down off the rack, she said, "At least I know what to get you for Christmas now."

"What would that be?" he asked as he handed the book off to his mother to hold while he pulled on his jacket.

"A real winter coat. It sure would be nice if you could make it. Everybody's coming."

"Everybody?" He took the book back from her.

"Sam and Aurelan and the kids. How long has it been since we all spent Christmas together? Bring Annie."

"I'll try my best. I promise."

They hugged. "I love you," she said.

"Love you, too, Mom," he responded in kind as they released each other. He opened the front door and stepped out onto the porch. His mother followed as far as the doorway.

"You be safe," she said. "And tell Annie I said 'hi.'"

"Will do."

And with that, James hugged his mother one more time, then turned away and headed out into the cold night.

"Bye," she called after him.

He turned back and watched his mother slowly close the door behind him, and caught a last glimpse of her right before the door shut.

He stood for a moment under the shadow of the porch roof, then he turned and faced out into the yard, and noticed with his first exhale how his breath billowed in foggy puffs from his nose and mouth. It really was cold, he realized. Much colder than he remembered it ever being before.

He drew his flimsy jacket collar tight and looked up at the deep blue-black overcast sky. The gentle tinkling sound to his right drew his gaze on the old wind chimes that hung beneath the eaves on the far end of the porch being gently turned in the winter wind.

He glanced back at the house—at the warm, flickering orange glow of the firelight seeping out through the windows. He sighed, tucked the book under his arm and stepped off the porch.

CHAPTER 38

Manhattan

The floor to ceiling crimson drapes were drawn aside and the glimmering lights of the city that never sleeps cast two narrow, ghostly, almost moonlight-blue shafts of light into the otherwise darkness. The only other light was a flickering orange glow coming from the beautiful brass-trimmed white-marble fireplace bookended between the windows. Unlike the real wood fireplace he'd just sat in front of mere hours ago, this one was of course did not burn real wood, rather it was some sort of combination of plasma and holography that when combined, created the wood-burning reality of heat and flickering flame perfectly. There was even the aroma of burning wood somehow woven into the magic because after all, this was the legendary *Plaza Hotel*.

Wrapped in a cocoon of tangled blankets and pillows that they'd liberated from the adjacent bedroom for the cause, Jim and Annie lay together on the floor, embraced within each others' arms just short of the marble hearth, their bodies rim lit by the dancing flames.

Annie sighed with contentment and spooned back into him as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "So much for seeing Les Mis."

"Sorry about that. Maybe next time," his breath touched her shoulder with each word.

"Who's complaining?" she smiled and drew her arm up and back to caress his face. "Don't you fret, M'sieur Marius…" she sang the first few words to the beginning of the song from *Les Misérables* softly, then stared into his eyes. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too," he commented softly as he stared off over her shoulder into the flames.

"I can tell," she teased him, smiling mischievously as she turned over, away from the fire and propped herself up on her elbow to face him. She pressed her lips to his and kissed him gently on his face as the flames sparkled in his eyes.

Kirk reached with his free hand and touched her face, running his finger down to her lips, which kissed them. Then he lifted his hand and brushed aside a long errant bang that had fallen over her aquamarine eye. "Those freckles," he smiled as he gazed on her face. "I missed those freckles."

"Yeah?" she asked playfully. "Any one in particular?"

"All of them." He lifted his hand and put it on her shoulder, then traced the rising and falling curves of her bare arm, noting how the firelight reflected in the sheen of perspiration that covered her skin.

"What are we going to do, you and I?" she squared her laser-gaze on him.

"Well I don't know about you, but I'm hungry," he said.

She smiled and half-chuckled. "That's not what I meant."

She traced a finger over the curve of his shoulder and said, "Is this how it's going to be for us? Meeting up wherever? Whenever?" Her tone didn't sound negative in the slightest, rather the question seemed to come from a more practical place.

"Has it really been five months?" he asked thoughtfully.

"This reminds me of back at the Academy. Remember? How whenever we could find time we'd take off somewhere for a long weekend?"

"That was you?" Kirk grinned mischievously.

"Don't make me hurt you," she gave him a playful punch in his shoulder. "Who was that one you were all moon-eyed over?"

"I think it was you," he teased back.

"Whatever," she shook her head and smiled.

She saw his gaze had shifted. He was looking past her, lost deep in thought. "Hello?" she called. "Earth calling Acting Captain Kirk?"

"Sorry." He met her gaze once more.

She touched her fingers to her lips and kissed them, then turned and touched them to his chest above his heart. "I know you were close." her voice still had that youthful rasp he'd known since childhood, and it was as warm and comforting as the heat from the fire. She was magic.

He gently took her hand and put those fingers to his own lips and kissed them softly.

"I really have missed you," he said as though to reinforce what he said earlier.

"I've missed you, too," she replied. Then her eyes darted away behind the cover of a blink and she added, with the slightest hint of hesitation, "And…I've got something to tell you." She hesitated for another moment, took a deep breath, then finally forced it out. "I'm leaving tomorrow. I've been assigned to the Yorktown as the new X.O." With that she exhaled as though a great weight had been lifted.

She was right. Her words did catch him completely off guard and he locked his gaze into her eyes, which glinted with the reflection from the flickering flames.

"I…wow," he finally managed to say. "I mean congratulations."

"Worst timing ever?" She pursed her lips tentatively.

"No, not at all," he immediately summoned all his strength to muster an honestly supportive tone, then smiled. "Good news is nice for a change. I'm happy for you. Yorktown. Good ship. Good skipper."

She leaned in and pressed her lips to his for a long kiss. "Thank you," she whispered, then after the briefest of a pause, turned and untangled herself, tossed the blankets aside, and stood up.

"Order some room service while I catch a quick shower."

"Need any help?" Kirk told her, admiring her flawless naked beauty in the firelight. "I mean those are some long legs—lot of work there—"

She turned to him and lifted one bare foot and pressed it into his chest, gently but firmly, pushing him to the floor. "You think you're all that," she playfully accused. She paused for a moment, studying him with her laser-beam gaze, then drew back her foot, turned and started walking toward the bedroom.

"Walk slower," he continued playfully, admiring her as she walked away, in and out through the blue shafts of light streaming through the curtains across the floor, swaying her hips before she disappeared into the darker bedroom.

"What do you want to eat?" he called after her.

"Surprise me," her voice echoed from the other room as a bright shaft of light suddenly cut across the darkness only to vanish just as quickly when she closed the bathroom door behind her.

Kirk lay there quietly thinking for a moment until he heard the faint patter of water running in the shower. He tossed the blankets aside and stood up. He pulled on the thick white hotel bathrobe he'd thrown over the back of a nearby chair earlier, drew it closed, and tied the belt around his waist. The soft cotton felt good against his bare skin.

"Room service," he called out loud into the darkness.

"Room service," a disembodied voice came back.

"Good. You're still open."

"We're always open, sir."

"Right, yeah, listen," he started, glancing off in the direction of the bedroom as if searching for inspiration. "You know what? I don't have a menu—"

Before he could finish, a glowing holographic menu coalesced in front of him, floating in mid-air, illuminating his face with a warm golden hue.

"Thanks."

As he ran his finger down the length of the glowing semi-translucent menu, drawing closer to the bottom by the second, he started feeling lost. Granted, The Plaza was a very fancy hotel, but this was still New York. He'd hoped that he would recognize at least half of the dishes on the menu. No such luck. Most of them weren't even in English—or from Earth for that matter.

Then, suddenly, the inspiration for which he'd been searching struck, and he raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Hey, this is going to sound strange and I know it's not on the menu, but do you have pizza?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. We can replicate it from anywhere you wish and have it delivered to your room," the voice answered.

"Anywhere?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

His command voice rose firmly. "Sebastian's Pizza, Gloucester, Massachusetts. Large with linguica, green peppers, onions—wait—forget the onions."

"To drink?" the voice asked conversationally.

"Two really cold beers. Something not too dark and local. Sam Adams if you have it."

"Will that be everything, sir?"

"Yes, thanks."

"Thank you, sir. It should be up shortly." And with that, the glowing translucent hologram menu vanished into thin air as though it had never been there.

He stepped over to the nearer of the twin windows and gazed out on the spectacular bird's eye view that stretched down the length of Manhattan's Fifth Avenue, past the diminutive Empire State Building, now dwarfed by the much taller and more modern buildings to its south and east and illuminated in seasonal red and green, all the way to Washington Square Park. While it obviously wasn't as bright as midday out there, the totality of all those thousands of glimmering city lights made it quite easy to see. He could even distinguish a lot of the architectural details that had been built into the much older, more elaborately sculpted Guilded

Age buildings that still stood proudly amidst the more modern ones as timeless monuments to those who had designed and built them, even after more than 300 years in some cases. In fact, a good number of the more modern buildings had even been built to echo the architectural themes of their predecessors.

His eyes fell on the upper one-third of the distant reflective One World Trade Center far beyond the park. Even after almost two and a half centuries, at just over 540 meters tall, it rose majestically above the southern tip of the Manhattan skyline and was hard to miss. It stood as a symbol of man's love for freedom, its twin beams of blue-white light piercing the night sky every year on September eleventh, year after year, century after century. While the original intent behind its construction had been to honor innocent lives tragically lost, and to symbolize the freedom for which it had been nicknamed, a poet back in 2101, upon looking back on the centennial of that tragic event, had referred to those beacons of light as "peace" and "hope" in what was to later become one of his most famous works, and the names had stuck. He couldn't remember the poet's name at the moment, but he did know that it was the very same poet who, much earlier in his life, had famously said that he preferred the words 'let me help' to any others…even to 'I love you.'

The city of New York had slowly evolved into a sort of living museum over the course of the last two-hundred years or so, always celebrating its history, in good times and bad. It was different from every other city he'd ever seen on Earth, or anywhere else for that matter. San Francisco, with its iconic Golden Gate Bridge and its cablecars that still ran their routes was the closest comparison he could draw. Well, maybe Paris with its Eiffel Tower, too.

His thoughts drifted back to his more rural upbringing—they seemed to be doing that a lot lately—to the nights he'd known growing up in Riverside and in Gettysburg. He grinned with the memory of those years. On moonless nights, so far away from the bright city lights, he'd needed to take a flashlight with him just to walk from the house to the barn to check on the horses before he went to bed. Sometimes, he recalled as his grin widened into a smile, he'd stand outside the barn and point the flashlight's focused beam of white light up into the star-filled sky. He'd aim it directly at one star or another as best he could, and imagine that

some alien being on some distant world somewhere, in thousands or perhaps even millions of years, might look up at just the right moment to see his beam arrive. He'd often imagined what that alien being might look like—what its skin might feel like and what color it might be, how big its body might be and what it might be shaped like, or how many arms and legs it might have…if any…how many fingers and toes, how many eyes and ears.

He smiled, realizing that some of the beings he'd encountered in his travels among the stars over the last few years had put his childhood imaginings to shame.

His grin faded as the raw emotions born of recent events suddenly reasserted themselves. The very idea that there were unknown forces out there, lurking in the shadows—perhaps even now—willing to stop at nothing to get what they wanted.

And in the middle of all this, two lovers. What a wonderful time they were having with one another again.

Who would have thought when they met on that Gettysburg trail for the very first time that summer so long ago, that they would be in each others' lives forever? Theirs was a unique relationship that no one could touch.

And as much as the thought of a possibility they were about to spend an extended amount of time apart, he was happy for her…truly happy. X.O. of the *Yorktown* was a great achievement and a real career bump. They would manage somehow. How did that song from that old movie go? The world will welcome lovers as time goes by? Except it wasn't just a world anymore, it was a universe.

Annie returned to the bedroom wearing a much shorter women's version of the hotel bathrobe, giving her still damp hair one last vigorous rub-down with a towel, which she then draped over the back of the desk chair on her way to join him by the window. Approaching him from behind, she wrapped her arms around him affectionately, pressing herself firmly against his back, and rested her chin on his shoulder.

"I ordered pizza," he told her.

"Perfect," she replied with a big smile. She kissed his ear, then she leaned past his shoulder for a moment and huffed a breath onto the window, which instantly

clouded up with condensation. Then she reached up with her index finger and traced in the condensation what finally became a rough drawing of a tree.

"I miss our tree," she told him wistfully. He felt her chin press into his shoulder and her warm breath on his cheek each time she spoke.

"It's still there. By the way, my mother says hi."

Then both gazed on her tree drawn in the mist for a few moments. His focus shifted once more at One World Trade Center. He imagined those gleaming twin beams of brilliant blue-white light rising into the night sky, and he decided that if he were ever to give his flashlight beam a name—that name would have to be 'Annie', for it was her warm light that had gleamed in his heart since the day he met her. Through all the hard times he'd gone through in his life, she'd always been there for him, even when distance had separated them, she was a constant beacon to guide him to safe harbor.

"I know it's been rough," she said when he didn't respond, lowering her voice and gently touching her lips to his neck. If she only knew.

But the effect that her mere presence had on him was both calming and emotionally stirring at the same time—the closest thing to a spiritual experience that he'd ever had. She made him feel that way every time they were together. She didn't even have to say anything. All she had to do was just be, and everything was right in the universe.

In a sudden moment of utter clarity, he finally got it. He finally understood. All he had to do was to just be for her as well.

She sighed. "So maybe we should start planning our next rendezvous?" she asked almost wistfully. "With both of us warping around the galaxy?"

"Your ship or mine?" he joked, drawn out of his melancholy.

She smiled, then whispered into his ear, "Second star to the right."

"And straight on 'til morning," he concluded, smiling as well.

"It's a date," she said, following up with a playful little nibble of his earlobe. Then, as she rested her chin on his shoulder again, she said, "You never told me about how your meeting with Admiral T'Pol went."

"Fine," he told her in a tone woven with unintended hesitation, again feeling that twinge of guilt for keeping secrets from her.

She laughed at his distracted response. "That's mysterious. You and the admiral got something going on I should be worried about? Then again, how can I blame you? Every warm blooded guy in Starfleet has a thing for her. Some women, too, for that matter."

"Something you want to tell me?" he countered.

"I just hope I look that good when I get to be her age. She has to be what…two hundred?"

"I'm meeting with her in the morning. I can ask her if you want."

"Don't. To Vulcans that might qualify as flirting."

Kirk turned her around and took her into his arms as he gazed into her aquamarine eyes, glowing with the reflecting city lights. Then he slipped a hand just inside the front of her robe, slid it gently up over her breast to her neck, and drew her in for one more tender kiss. Her mouth tasted of cool mint and her hair smelled of fresh apricots. It's roots felt warm to his fingertips, but the rest felt cold and damp where it lay across the back of his hand. A knock on the door interrupted them.

"That was fast," He sounded almost disappointed as she retied her robe and went to sit in front of the fireplace again.

"Maybe it's Admiral T'Pol," Annie joked. "Vulcan sex—what's that even like?"

He adjusted his robe and pulled the belt a little tighter and opened the door, a smile appeared on a young boyish face—one of the hotel employees he recognized from the lobby. Strangely he did not have a pizza or anything else with him.

"Captain Kirk?" the young man asked.

Kirk looked at him and then briefly shot a glance up and down the hallway. "Yes?"

The young man's smile suddenly twisted into rage as he reached behind his back, and whipped out some kind of small pistol toward Kirk's chest.

Fortunately Kirk reacted faster than his adversary. He slammed the door on the assailant's arm but the pistol went off barely a foot in front of him, and its bright crimson muzzle flash momentarily blinded him. The bolt of energy reflected off the wall mirror by the door and hit the opposite wall mere inches from Annie's face.

"Get down!" Kirk shouted to Annie, shoving as hard as he could against the door as he blinked over and over, trying to force his vision to return. The would-be assassin shoved back, but Kirk slammed his shoulder on the door again, then again and again, until he finally dropped the weapon to the floor. Kirk kicked it away. "Get the gun!" he yelled.

Annie ran over and grabbed the odd looking pistol off the floor, then whirled around and aimed at the door, but the assailant suddenly plowed right though the door as if Kirk weren't even there, hurling him across the room and smacking Annie's arm, sending the pistol tumbling from her hand as she cried out in pain and scrambled away.

Kirk recovered and looked back up at the hotel employee-turned assassin as he rose to his feet. Curiously, he was just standing there inside the doorway with the strangest expression on his face, almost as if he were no longer aware of his surroundings.

Kirk didn't wait. He dashed forward, grabbed the decorative chair from beside the doorside plant table, and swung it like a Louisville Slugger with all his might at the deceptively diminutive employee, who seemed altogether unaffected when it struck him across the face and splintered into several pieces…until his blank expression suddenly returned to one of anger. With one swipe of his small arm he dealt Kirk a mighty blow that lifted him off the floor and then slammed him back down with a thud and an explosion of pain.

Trying to ignore the pain and shaking the fog from his head, Kirk looked up at his attacker again, who began to writhe as though he were suddenly in pain. Within a span of seconds, and with a sickening sound like the cracking of bones, he morphed into a huge bear-like creature with four-foot arms more muscular than his legs, with six-inch tusk-like fangs and eyes that glowed like super-heated steel.

Annie, momentarily as frozen as he had been, immediately started scouring the floor frantically in search of the pistol.

The beast let loose a deafening roar, then lunged at Kirk with incredible speed.

Kirk ducked and rolled out of the way just in time, barely avoiding what he knew might very well have been instant death as the creature swung one of its massive clawed hands at the back of his head, then crashed full-bore into the bureau, smashing it to pieces like so many matchsticks, and broke partway through the wall behind.

Annie quickly took advantage of its moment of dazed confusion to put her search for the elusive pistol on hold and hurled the desk chair at its head while Kirk sprinted toward the fireplace to grab one of the tube-pillows he and Annie had been using, and jammed it into the flames. Thankfully it actually ignited and he yanked it out again and thrust the flaming end at the beast bearing down on him. A good idea in theory, but it only served to infuriate the creature further.

"Get out of here Annie!" He yelled as he tried to keep the beast's attention focused on him with the flaming pillow. "Here!" he yelled and waved his arms at the creature, drawing its full attention while his eyes darted to Annie and he started to back-step away from her. Annie ran toward the hallway door but the creature spun on her and blocked the doorway.

Kirk tossed the flaming pillow away and glanced around for something else. Annie's wet towel, still hanging off the corner of the chair. He grabbed it and looped it through the chair back and swung the chair a couple times, using the added inertia of the towel like a slingshot to finally smash it into the creature. The chair flew apart and wood splintered and flew in all directions, but did little to stop the attacking beast.

The beast glared at him with murder in its eyes, then drew an impossibly deep breath and roared like an enraged grizzly, baring its dozens of yellow-brown saliva dripping fangs as it started toward him again.

Suddenly a bright blue-white flash and an almost deafening high-pitched whine filled the room. It only lasted for maybe a second before it stopped, but the creature's roar, which had instantly crescendoed into what sounded more like an anguished and agonized scream, went on for several more.

Kirk turned and looked at Annie, thinking that she had found the alien assailant's gun—but she hadn't. She was standing there empty-handed and looking as confused as he was, but not at the creature as much as at the doorway—something Kirk couldn't see because the creature was still blocking his view.

Finally the beast fell quiet, as if it had suddenly choked on its own saliva and was no longer capable of crying out. It relaxed its posture, lifted its eyes to the ceiling as it moaned for a moment or two, and then fell forward like a tree falling in a forest and hit the floor with a thunderous, bone-crushing thud.

Dead or unconscious, Kirk didn't know. Nor did he care.

In the hallway door stood a human figure, silhouetted by the hallway lights that streamed into the room around him, and for one brief moment a vision of his grandfather sitting proudly in the saddle atop Admiral flashed through his mind.

"Lights," Kirk called out a little louder than necessary. The single light in the center of the ceiling instantly came up, and Kirk drew a quick breath as he recognized the man immediately. His hair was longer and a little grayer than he remembered, and he was a bit thicker around the middle than he'd once been, but there was no mistaking who he was.

"Cain?" Kirk said breathlessly.

CHAPTER 39

Park Avenue

A few short moments later all three were standing in the service elevator as it descended. Kirk and Annie were quickly dressing in their hastily gathered clothes from piles at their feet on the floor.

"What are you doing here Cain?" Kirk asked as he pulled up his pants.

"And what was that…thing?" Annie quickly added as she pulled her uniform shirt past her head and straightened it.

"Cameloid," Cain answered, dividing his attention between watching them dress and the elevator door. "It can change it's shape at will to anything it wants."

"I know what a Cameloid is," Annie pressed, beginning to get annoyed. "Why did it attack us?"

Cain looked back at them again and answered flatly, "It was trying to kill you."

"Kill us for what?" She wasn't having it.

"Not you—him," Cain clarified as he pointed at Kirk, who said nothing, rather only shot Cain a suspicious glance.

"Jim?" Annie was even more perplexed as she turned to stare at him.

"Did T'Pol send you?" Kirk shifted his focus to Cain, having apparently decided to risk asking.

"T'Pol?" Annie immediately spun on Kirk with her laser-gaze.

"Is this because of that vendetta the Klingons have against you?"

"Charlie was murdered, Annie," Kirk spoke with hesitation, knowing this was going to throw her.

"Murdered?"

"Wait until we're in the car," Cain cut in sharply, and as soon as the elevator doors opened he aimed his pistol through them. The service hallway was deserted.

Once Cain had gotten them outside and with his head on a fast pivot, looking for danger in every possible direction, he let the alley emergency exit close behind them and ushered them toward a waiting Yellow Taxi cab parked in the shadows a few meters farther down the service alleyway.

Throwing open the rear cab door, and hustled Annie and Kirk inside—they took the rear seat facing forward—and then jumped into the lead seat beside the drive module that faced backwards. "Go!" he shouted at the drive computer as he pulled the door closed behind him.

"Please state a destination?" the computer politely requested in a calm, even voice.

"Just drive!" Cain shouted.

"Thank you, and enjoy the ride." Apparently that was a valid command because the cab levitated up off the street, and as it pulled up the alley and then turned right and headed down Manhattan's Park Avenue South at what was no doubt a precisely determined safe and legal speed, Cain leaned to his right and stared out through the center of the back window.

Traffic on the surface streets seemed typically light for such a late hour, Kirk observed out the side window as he gave himself a moment to catch his breath and try to wrap his brain around what had just happened to them. He looked over at Annie, whose still somewhat frightened but confident gaze briefly locked with his before she turned and looked out the other side. Then he turned his attention to Cain, who was still staring wide-eyed out through the back window. It was time for some answers.

"I don't think we're being followed," Cain said absently. Then he noticed both Kirk's and Annie's eyes fastened on him. "Okay, listen, Jimmy, I got a lot to tell you and not much time."

"Did—T'Pol send you?" Kirk pressed firmly, needing that question answered, and Cain knew it.

"Yes," he rasped. "She sent me."

"But the medical report said Charlie died of his injuries," Annie broke in.

"Can we drop her off somewhere?" Cain ignored her and turned to Kirk, which greatly affronted her. Apparently Kirk had finally had enough cloak and dagger and put his hand on hers, which she noticed. "Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of her." His tone was final and unwavering.

Annie broke in gently, but her feelings of having been slighted still evident in her tone. "You don't have to worry about me."

"She's not going anywhere, Cain." Kirk prompted, glaring at him.

"Fine." Cain relented almost in a whisper. He hesitated another moment. "Jimmy, I'm the one who sent you that priority message." Cain let that set in for a second or two, but then continued before Kirk could respond. "I couldn't risk contacting you directly, so it was the only way I could be certain to get you back here safely, quickly and quietly."

"Does T'Pol know this?" Kirk asked. "She said she didn't know who sent it other than thinking it was the same people who killed Charlie."

"Yes, she knows now." Seeing his suspicious expression, Cain drew a deep breath, staring intently at him. "Jimmy," he finally started to respond, though clearly still hesitant.

"Your father is alive."

Silence except for the slight muffled hum of the cab electronics. Both Kirk and Annie were frozen in shock. Kirk opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come to him. Annie's eyes widened in disbelief as well, but she said nothing, either

because it was beyond comprehension or because she began to suspect that Cain might not be mentally balanced.

"It's true, Jimmy," Cain said, "He's alive."

Kirk suddenly found it hard to breathe as an overwhelming sense of vertigo washed over him. Tunnel vision forced him to focus solely on Cain, who seemed to grow both larger and more distant with each passing moment. He didn't believe a word of it, yet knew—or wished desperately at the same time—that it was true. The rhythm of the passing streetlights strobed across his face—light-dark, light-dark, light-dark—became nauseating, and he thought perhaps he might even throw up. He'd felt this once before—fourteen years ago—as he stood near the steps of his grandfather's home in Gettysburg—the day his father died.

"Pull over," Kirk finally spoke in a dry hushed tone.

"Jimmy, listen to me," Cain urgently insisted. "Your father really is alive. You have to believe me, Jimmy. I've seen him."

Kirk fumbled with the door handle as the cab pulled over to the side of the road and slowed to a hovering stop. He hesitated for a few seconds, then looked up at him. "My father is dead, Cain," he said firmly, his dry voice betraying the anger that had begun to grow out of his confusion. "You were there."

"Yes, I was there," Cain adamantly confirmed. Then he reached out and grasped Kirk's wrist, and gently but firmly pulled his hand away from the door handle. "Hear me out, Jimmy," he said. "Whether you believe me or not, your father is alive. I need you to get past it because what's at stake is everything."

Kirk wrenched his arm free of Cain's grasp and glared at him, but didn't try for the door handle.

"Keep driving," Cain instructed the taxi AI, which obediently accelerated the cab back into traffic as Cain settled back into his own seat.

Glaring angrily but reining back his anger as best he could out of respect for Cain's longtime friendship with his family, Kirk's gaze burned on Cain relentlessly.

"Fifteen years ago. At Rigel Seven—at the summit—the explosion aboard Starfleet One? The crash that followed?" he began methodically—saying it aloud for the first time suddenly made him realize just how incredible it all must have sounded to Jimmy, but he pressed on with the explanation that he'd rehearsed so many times in his mind as quickly as he could because Jimmy looked like he was about ready to explode. "It killed Arkanon instantly, but not your father. He escaped."

"You brought his body back!" Kirk bellowed. "You were at the funeral! We all were!"

"I brought *a* body back—a body I thought was his. But it wasn't." Reading the expression on Jimmy's face, Cain realized that convincing him wasn't going to be easy. There were so many convoluted and confusing details that he had to explain. He paused and drew a deep breath, then continued, being careful not to rush through it. "After the explosion killed Arkanon, your father and Arkanon's most trusted officers knew right away it was a coup. They also realized your father was in danger, too—that whoever had murdered Arkanon would also be after him. Your father faked his own death and went into hiding."

"Stop!" Kirk shouted, cutting him off sharply. "Just stop."

"I'm sorry, but I'm telling you the truth, so you're going to have to get past it and accept it!" Cain came back just as loudly and firm, surprising both he and Annie.

"I don't get it," Annie finally cut in. "How could they have faked it? With another body? A medical examination would have shown it wasn't his father." Kirk turned to look at her, possibly surprised she was considering the very idea, even if only to dismiss it outrightly.

"They used the onboard transporter to beam your father off before the shuttle crashed on the planet. Then they used his pattern in the buffer to replicate his body. That was the body they pulled from the wreckage—the body I brought back to your family—just a lifeless doppelgänger, but with all organic traits intact, and one that would hold up under even the strictest post-mortem analysis. Your father escaped with a bunch of Arkanon's most loyal officers."

"That's impossible," Annie started firmly. "It's well-known fact that you cannot rematerialize an exact matching organism without using proto-matter—and proto-matter is theoretically impossible—"

"For God's sake! Do you want to sit here all night and talk about proto-matter?"

"Come on, Cain," Kirk began, his voice much calmer now, but he was still nowhere near convinced. "Why would my father have to go to all the trouble to fake his death?"

Cain paused for a moment and drew another breath, knowing what he said next was going to be even more difficult to fathom.

"Because he knew it would never end. The forces that wanted Arkanon dead wanted him dead too. They would never stop. The only course was to get away and regroup. To fight another day." He let that sink in and then continued. "Fifteen years ago, Arkanon uncovered a conspiracy involving some very powerful figures —a conspiracy that reached to the highest levels in both the Federation and in the Klingon Empire. They didn't want peace between us and the Klingons, and when your father and Arkanon's work made peace possible, they plotted Arkanon's assassination. It was Arkanon who uncovered the plot just before the summit, but was never able to identify the conspirators. Arkanon warned your father about it in a secret message just before they were to travel to the summit because he didn't expect to make it there. The only thing he didn't know was that the assassins planned to strike at the summit itself. A grave miscalculation as we all now know. But everything he'd uncovered on the plot was on that message, including evidence that would implicate one key figure in the plot—General Gast."

"Gast?" Kirk's eyebrows rose.

"Yes, that Gast—the current chancellor of the Klingon Empire." Cain watched Kirk process this for a moment or two. "We think Gast knows your father is alive now too, and he is killing anyone else who might know this. He wants to find and eliminate your father before he can reveal Gast's complicity in Arkanon's assassination." He stopped a moment, studying his every reaction. "I hope now you see just how big all this is. That's why Gast's agents killed Charlie. They thought Charlie

knew what I know—or where I was at least—or that I had the memory module with Arkanon's message on it. Regardless, Gast knows that if he can find me, he can find your father."

"Where is he?" Kirk asked. "My father?"

Cain glanced at the drive unit to his right to clue his companions in on what his immediate concern was regarding the disclosure of George's whereabouts. "I can't tell you," he then told them, just to make sure they understood. "Not here."

"Why would my father just hide out for fifteen years? With so much at stake?"

"Numbers. He hoped that one day he and the Arkanon loyalists might have an opportunity to liberate the Klingon Empire from Gast's treachery and restore Arkanon's legacy—and peace between humans and Klingons."

"Who else knows about all this?"

"Again, not here," he resisted as his eyes darted knowingly to the front of the cab, and then sensing Kirk's retort, "But I will tell you there are others."

"So Gast knows his father's alive?" Annie asked. "Does Prath?"

"We don't think so," Cain sounded confident.

"Why? Why would he not tell Prath?" Annie pressed. "With the vendetta against Jim's family? With an opportunity to finally exact revenge for his father's death? Sorry Jim."

"Because he's after me, we're sure Gast knows your father is still alive and knows the truth about what happened. That's now why he's after you. He wants that data module with Arkanon's message destroyed and everyone along with it because if his secret gets out, all of his grand plans fall apart."

"What grand plans?" Annie asked quizically.

Cain nodded. "Gast wants to have Prath Arkanon declared Emperor."

"Emperor?" Annie exclaimed, raising her eyebrows in surprise. "The Klingon Empire hasn't had a sitting Emperor for—"

"A thousand years," Cain said, cutting her off. "Yes, I know the history. But Gast is in trouble politically. He knows he can't continue to perpetuate a war that's gone on for fifteen years now. He knows it's only a matter of time that a coup to overthrow him happens. But he also knows that as the son of their legendary martyred hero Arkanon, the Klingon people would accept Prath as Emperor. After his father's assassination, when Prath was still very young, Gast took him under his wing as a sort of protégé. He's mentored—more like manipulated—him for the past fifteen years. With Prath as emperor, Prath will control the Empire while Gast controls Prath."

"Where's this message from Arkanon? This module with all this evidence?"

"The only existing copy is the one they believe I have. When I visited Garrovick at Starfleet Medical, they must have thought that I told him. That's why they killed him. Then they came after you."

"Did Garrovick know anything?" Kirk asked in nothing short of an accusatory tone.

"No," Cain answered, shaking his head with just as evident remorse. "Charlie didn't know anything. I was just visiting an old friend."

"So who else is involved in this?" Kirk asked.

"We don't know. Even now, after all these years, we still haven't positively identified all of them--only the few names identified on that data module. They refer to themselves as 'The Continuity.'"

"The Continuity?" Kirk asked, perhaps sorry he did, since it only brought up yet another new wrinkle in an already convoluted new reality. But Cain didn't let him think about it too long.

"It's time for you and I to go bring your father home."

"How? I have orders to head back to Farragut in the morning," Kirk said.

"I know. You'll be returning aboard Enterprise. It's all been arranged," Cain said, then his voice dropped to just above a whisper. "Don't go back to the hotel. Don't go home. Find some place else to wait—someplace public."

Before Kirk could respond, Cain turned to the driver AI and spoke in a normal voice, “Pull over,” then reached for the door handle as the cab once again pulled over to the side of the road and stopped. He turned back to Kirk.

“Cestus. Naska Starport—two days from now. Orion’s Belt Casino. Meet me there.” He cracked the door open, then looked Kirk dead in the eye and said, “Be careful.”

He peered out through the barely open door for one brief moment, then jumped out and disappeared into the dark, leaving Kirk and Annie looking at each other.

CHAPTER 40

San Francisco

Kirk drained the last of his second cup of coffee and set his mug down on the table, then stood up, smoothed his new uniform. Annie nudged her half-full cup aside and then slipped her hand into his and stood with him.

They were both running on no sleep and would have loved nothing more than to go back to Annie's apartment on Nob Hill up on California Street and grab about twelve hours, but that was in a life that didn't exist anymore.

"Someplace public," Cain had stressed before he disappeared into the murky shadows of night-time Manhattan. Feeling a bit exposed in New York, they had themselves beamed to San Franciso's *Presidio Station*. They would have to come here anyway, so arriving just after 2AM local time, they'd found a table easily in the sparsely populated upper concourse café, where they had sat close to each other and said nothing than for a few whispers here and there.

While they didn't return to *The Plaza*, Kirk had been contacted by the concierge to let him know he had left his book, and they promptly beamed it to the luggage pick-up at *Presidio Station*. In hindsight it was probably a bad idea, but being in a secure public place, he wasn't too concerned.

As the first rays of daybreak began to turn the sky blue, knowing that Annie would be perfectly safe waiting for him in the lounge with the growing morning crowd—the conspirators were after him, not her, after all—Kirk had left her there and gone to her apartment across the bay to pick up her uniform and a couple other things she needed for her arrival aboard *Yorktown*.

The air was dank and a little chilly when he returned to *Presidio Station*. He spotted Annie, sitting alone where he'd left her at the café table, gazing off in the distance. She looked so vulnerable. It was his fault she was in this whole mess. He wanted to protect her but knew she would be safer on *Yorktown*—far away from him.

Having not gotten to enjoy the pizza and beer they'd ordered at *The Plaza* earlier, he was hungry and he knew she had to be too. He stopped one of the hovering servers and ordered them a quick breakfast of toasted bagels and cream cheese. Having had their fill of coffee, he added two orange juices as well. When she returned from the bathroom after changing into her new *Yorktown* uniform, they stepped together onto the escalator and descended from the upper to the lower concourse. She slipped her arm into his and drew him close, and neither said anything. They stepped off at the bottom of the escalator and started across the sprawling, crowded concourse.

They walked arm in arm past several large pillars and across the massive blue, white, black, and yellow seal of the *United Federation of Planets* emblazoned in the center of the marble floor. Every sense seemed amplified. He felt the gentle impact of their footsteps as they tapped the hard floor. He felt the warmth of Annie's arm in his. He could hear each and every whisper of every voice echoing across the concourse, and the thrum of every tram as they arrived and departed. Every pattern and color and texture that he could see looked a hundred times richer and more defined than ever before. A kaleidoscope of scents assaulted him with every breath—various perfumes and colognes and the aromas of dozens of varieties of foods, all carried aloft on the cool, dank, salty marine layer blowing in from San Francisco Bay.

He gazed around him as they walked, observing civilians and Starfleet personnel alike as they went about their seemingly routine business, seeing them for the first time in a new, cold light that chilled him inside. From day one at the Academy, if not earlier, Starfleet had been his life. It had given him comfort and purpose, and he had committed himself to it wholly. But now it seemed strange and alien somehow and everyone looked suspicious in one way or another as they ei-

ther met his gaze—or didn't. Who were these people? Were they loyal or part of the dark conspiracy?

Moments later they arrived at the small craft landing platform where *Enterprise's* shuttlecraft Galileo rested with its hatch open and its boarding ramp extended. As fate would have it, he had to leave first. They stopped at the base of the ramp and Kirk released Annie's arm, then turned and faced her, guiding her aside to stand next to one of the pillars. She looked him up and down and managed a half-smile.

"Look at you," she said as she brushed something off his shoulder.

"Look at you," he smiled right back.

He felt her hand brush against his, then grasp onto his fingers.

"Jim, I'm a little scared," she admitted.

"I know," he said. And then he confessed, "Me too. But everything's going to be all right. Just stay here and don't talk to anyone. When do you report to Yorktown?"

"In a couple hours," she answered as her eyes locked with his. They were glistening like pools of liquid aquamarine. Kirk gazed into those beautiful blue eyes that he knew so well. He wanted with all his heart to stay with her. Suddenly all his notions of duty and loyalty to Starfleet seemed trivial.

Annie leaned in and pressed herself against him, her glistening eyes distant as she stared over his shoulder. He held her close for a long time, then pressed his lips to her ear and kissed it. He wanted to remember the feeling of her hair against his cheek, the gentle brush of her fingertips across the back of his neck, the warmth and the comfort of her arms around him, and his around her.

"How will I know you're okay?" Annie whispered into his ear. His heart began to ache. She was obviously scared and all she could do is worry about him. In his mind's eye he could still see that freckle-faced nine-year-old girl standing there looking at him that October day with tears in her eyes as he learned of his father's death. He could feel the tears beginning to pool in his eyes and he blinked to stave them off. He had to be strong for her because she had always been strong for him.

Annie spotted the shuttle pilot walking up the boarding ramp. He knew it was time to go, but he said nothing. “You should go.” she whispered.

Kirk looked in her eyes again. He looked for a moment as though he were going to say something, but then she leaned in and kissed him again, holding his face in her hands as she did.

“Be safe.” She said as she leaned away and studied him with her laser-gaze.

“I have—I need—to tell you something,” he stammered, looking down at his feet a moment before looking up and locking with her gaze once more. “It’s important.” Then as he searched for his words, her face betrayed new concern.

“What is it?”

She said nothing as he seemed to be gathering his next words.

“That summer in Gettysburg, I went riding with my grandfather every single day—for two weeks—hoping to run into you again. That day when I ran into you on that trail? It wasn’t by accident.”

A smile creased her face and she leaned in and kissed him softly on the lips, then whispered.

“I know.”

“You did?” His words tripped from his lips.

“I did—but I have a question for you. Do you remember the first thing you *said* to me that day?”

“Hi?”

“Not even close,” she smiled. “You asked, ‘where do you live.’”

“I asked that?”

“You did.”

“Some opening line.” he smiled.

"And do you remember my answer?" Then she waited as she studied every detail of his face, letting him flounder with his memories for a few moments before she finally drew him into another embrace and turned her lips into his ear.

"I said, 'second star to the right and straight on 'til morning.'" Her soft lips brushed against his ear as she spoke each word.

"I remember."

"Come find me. I'll be there waiting for you," she whispered.

He gently pushed her away so he could gaze into her aquamarine eyes.

"I love you, Antonia."

She smiled and shook her head. "Tell me something I don't know. You've been moon-eyed over me since the day you met me."

The whine of the shuttle engine powering up distracted them.

"Well, that's me," Kirk said with a hesitant smile as he glanced at the pilot standing in the shuttle hatch.

"Be careful," Annie said, smiling back sheepishly, probably just as unsure as she let her hand slide from his shoulder to her side.

He paused as if he was going to say something else, changed his mind and simply smiled, then started to turn toward the shuttlecraft and began to walk up the ramp.

"Hey you!" her voice shouted from behind, catching him just inside the hatchway where he stopped and turned back to look on her. She really was just so beautiful, standing there with her long blonde hair being tousled in the gentle breeze.

"I love you too." she said, throwing him a grin as that breeze blew a few golden strands of hair across her eyes before she brushed them aside. He studied her, watched her—memorized everything about her in that moment before giving her a last smile. And with that he took a single step backward and allowed the shuttlecraft's airlock doors to close between them.

The shuttle propulsion systems whined higher, then the white spacecraft lifted effortlessly off the platform and pulled away. Kirk gazed out through the small window in the closed hatch, straining to keep her in view as long as he could. He watched as she finally turned and walked off into the crowd.

CHAPTER 41

Enterprise

As he stepped onto the threshold to the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*, dark-haired Captain Christopher Pike briefly shifted his gaze to the ship's readiness report on a tablet someone standing nearby handed him as soon as he stepped out of the elevator. After a quick glance, he pressed his thumb to the screen which popped up a dialog that indicated his authorization, then handed the tablet back to the crew member that had given it to him.

"What's the hold-up?" he turned his gaze to meet his comms officer's.

"We have a hold from the transporter room, sir."

"Who? Kirk?" Pike asked, slightly annoyed.

"Doctor Piper, sir," she answered hesitantly, "Doctor Boyce's replacement."

From all around the bridge, long-serving officers and crew turned toward them with knowing expressions on their faces. Pike shared their sorrow of course, but he forced himself to maintain his official, confident demeanor.

"As you were," Pike announced almost immediately, following which everyone turned back to their stations. He turned to his comms officer, "Five minutes. Otherwise he can ride in the transporter buffer for all I care—" Pike stopped short. The last thing he wanted was to be taken literally. "Let me know once he's aboard."

He turned and continued toward center seat where he sat without ceremony. Obviously something was bothering him—and it bothered him that it bothered him. His eyes shifted to the empty space beside him. It felt strange, not having his long-time X.O. at his side. Robin Archer had just been promoted to captain of the

Yorktown right out from under him. He was going to miss her terribly, but it couldn't be denied that she'd earned that promotion at least a dozen times over. He could only hope that Spock might one day soon turn out to be half as good an X.O. as she was. He was off to a slow start.

Robin Archer had not been his choice for X.O. No, she'd been forced on him by Starfleet Command and unfortunately became the target of his irritation over it. Certainly the recently retired elder statesman and former Admiral Jonathan Archer had been behind it—grooming his one-and-only granddaughter to fulfill some romantic notion of a family legacy. At least that's how he saw it anyway. Phil Boyce told him that he was projecting his ire at Starfleet onto her, rather than giving her the benefit of a doubt. Phil had a way of cutting right to the chase. He had been absolutely right, too, and it didn't take long to prove it either.

On their very first mission, Robin really shined. It was during 'that thing on Rigel VII', as the incident was often referred to now. *Enterprise* received secret orders to evacuate a Starfleet special forces team trapped on Gastillion—or Rigel VII—or whatever the hell it was called now. The special forces team had been taken hostage by a Kaylar clan that they had supposedly been arming to foment an insurrection against the Klingons.

The Kaylar and their hatred and distrust of everyone had legitimate roots. After two-thousand years, the hundred or so once proud Kaylar clans had spent the last two centuries ruled by outworlders. First came the human colonists who simply took what they wanted, drawing up treaties and making promises, only to break them. Then came the occupation by their long lost Klingon brothers, who following the catastrophic fallout of the failed summit, had wasted no time occupying the archaic world. Kaylar clans were wiped out, or were enslaved to provide labor for the Klingon military machine being established there. Pockets of Kaylar resistance still managed to roam freely, but they were too small and disorganized to be considered dangerous to the Klingon occupational forces. So while the Kaylar hated the colonizing invaders from Earth, they hated the Klingons who took their place even more. The conflict had odd parallels to Earth's twentieth-century Vietnam conflict.

When the secret orders came, Pike was suspicious of Starfleet's motives and decided to accompany the MACO squad tasked to rescue the trapped team.

But it wasn't Starfleet with some sort of ulterior agenda he needed to be worried about this time. Rather it was the Kaylar. Only after arriving did Pike find out that the special ops team had already been captured and killed weeks before by some unimaginative rival clan leader that had failed to realize their value as a bargaining chip to trade with the Klingons. This one did, however, and had cleverly claimed to be still holding the special ops team hostage. His ruse was designed to lure and capture a Starfleet rescue team which they then could trade to the Klingons.

Suddenly Pike and his MACO rescuers found themselves trapped—ironically, in the very same fortress where the ill-fated summit had taken place fifteen years earlier.

When this happened, Robin didn't waste time debating pros and cons. She acted. She led another team down to the surface and caught the Kaylar completely by surprise. She rescued Pike and his team, and the follow-up Starfleet review board ultimately supported her actions unanimously. But in the aftermath, Pike blamed himself for allowing himself to be manipulated so easily. The entire incident affected him profoundly, because up to that point in his career, he'd not experienced failure. In a sense, the whole event was *Kobayashi Maru* played out in reality—with him playing the part of the *Kobayashi Maru* and Robin changing the rules. She was impressive. Kirk may have defeated a simulation, but Robin beat the real thing.

Unfortunately, both she and Phil were gone now. Phil was dead and the powers-that-be in Starfleet realized that they were wasting an extraordinary tactician in a first officer's role when they were short on qualified starship captains. Robin was whisked away and given command of *Yorktown*, and Pike was forced to promote Spock into the vacated X.O. spot—not that Spock was not qualified—he was—but he was no Robin Archer. But then again, he'd been wrong about her.

He was missing Phil as much as he was missing Robin. Phillip Boyce had been so much more than just the ship's chief medical officer. What was it about ship's

captains and their doctors? Since the days tall ships sailed the high seas, their captains and their doctors seemed to forge special friendships that often trumped duty to king and country. Phil been a fixture on *Enterprise* for as long as he could remember. A good friend of Bob April's, Phil had joined the *Enterprise* crew as chief medical officer just days before she had cruised out of spacedock for the very first time. He'd originally planned to transfer to a ground assignment after shakedown trials were completed, but when that time came, his plans had changed and he instead remained aboard. Then, when April was promoted to Fleet Command, Boyce stayed on again, finding a new friend in Pike. The rest was history.

Pike glanced at the empty space next to his chair where Boyce had so often stood during the best and worst of times. Phil had been a man of few words, but when they came, they were words of wisdom, and Pike had always managed to find his North Star by them.

In a chance encounter following Boyce's memorial service yesterday, he ran into old man Archer, who had pulled him aside and apologized for his granddaughter being forced on him. Archer said that if he had been in his shoes, he would have felt greatly put upon and would have dealt with it far less gracefully than he did. Then he confessed something that Pike never expected to hear. He said that he'd wanted his granddaughter to serve under and learn from and be mentored by the very best. That's why she ended up on his ship. What a bittersweet moment. It was the one bright spot in a series of unfortunate events.

Pike took another deep breath and gazed at the comforting vista on the main screen. It was hard to believe that his first five-year mission as master and commander had been over for almost a year already. He could still vividly remember his first day as captain of *Enterprise* like it was only a week ago. Bob April himself had hand-picked him for the job, and the prospect of carrying all that responsibility on his shoulders had shaken him somewhat in the beginning. Five years gone by—just like that.

The elevator doors swished open behind him. Pike turned his chair to face the young man in command gold who stepped out into the alcove, but no farther.

Looking confident but a little hesitant, he was sporting the oval insignia of the starship *Farragut* on his chest.

"Captain Kirk."

"Acting captain, sir," Kirk replied as he assumed the position of attention.

"Call yourself whatever you like—just don't block my elevator," Pike insisted with one last look at him, then spun around to face forward again. Kirk immediately turned on his heels and walked purposefully around to the portside steps and descended to the lower level to stand to Pike's left.

He was in Boyce's spot. Pike bristled slightly as he gazed at the young man in silence for a moment. So this was the son of the legendary George Kirk whom Starfleet had been buzzing about since before he even graduated from the Academy. The cadet who had beaten *Kobyashi Maru*.

Kirk was from Iowa too—not too far from Riverside, actually, where Pike had spent time overseeing the Constitution Class prototype that had been built to scale there. It was an odd sight for sure—a full-sized to-scale starship rising in all its glory high above the flat Iowa landscape. Unfortunately the only stars that ship would ever see would pass high overhead in the skies on clear Iowa nights.

And now it seemed as though that same James Tiberius Kirk from Iowa was about to become the youngest officer ever command a ship of the line. Then again, war always provided opportunities for rapid career advancement.

Pike shifted his gaze toward the man at the science station. It seemed as if fate had conspired for two unlikely paths to cross again on his bridge. Spock had been the Koby's graduate student caretaker at the Academy when Kirk famously beat the test. Whatever the Vulcan equivalent of a craw was, having some upstart underclassman embarrass him like that must have really stuck in it. Furthermore, Kirk's argument before the only open proceeding was so brilliant and compelling, that the whole incident disappeared beneath a cloak of secrecy, with the only note in the official record being a cryptic four-word sentence that read, 'Commendation for original thinking.' Pike had suspected at the time—and he still did—that the Starfleet simply didn't know what else to do with the firebrand son of the legen-

dary late George S. Kirk, so rather than blow the whole thing out of proportion, they simply made it go away and moved on. When Spock first came aboard he'd broached the subject with him, but all he'd gotten out of him was that he had been sworn to secrecy by Starfleet Command not to discuss the incident. That ended that. Might Spock have been holding a grudge? Grudges were not logical, but it was common knowledge that Spock was half human, and chose to be mysterious in both camps.

"Skipper, I feel compelled to apologize for all this irregularity." Kirk's voice to his side snapped Pike back to the present.

"If Starfleet wants me to do something—fine. It's done." Pike came back somewhat curtly before he could filter it.

Kirk picked up on his tone and decided to forego further comment. He knew that it had to be frustrating to be relegated to what seemed to amount to a taxi run, with no further explanation.

"Captain," the comms officer interrupted. "Transporter room one reports Doctor Piper has beamed aboard."

"Finally," Pike shot back. "Our new chief medical officer," he added to counter a curious glance from Kirk.

Pike pressed a button on the right arm of his chair with a well-practiced gesture, not even looking at it as his eyes remained fixed on the front viewport. "Engineering?"

"Scott here, sir," came the answer almost immediately, heavy with a Scottish brogue. "The mains are online, Captain. Just give the word."

What might have possibly qualified for a shadow of a smile creased Pike's face. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I seem to recall my chief engineer telling me we wouldn't have warp engines online until tomorrow."

"It's always tomorrow somewhere, sir," Scotty's countered, following which Pike closed the intercom.

"All-clear from Dock Command, Captain," the comms officer reported.

"Mister Tyler," Pike called to the helmsman, "cast off all moorings. Make your speed one quarter impulse."

Tyler's fingers swept gracefully across the helm controls. "Aye, sir. Moorings clear, tractor-lock released," he confirmed. "Helm answering one-quarter impulse."

As the ship's velocity steadily increased, Kirk became hyper-aware of every little detail of his surroundings. He noted every minute beep and chirp of the controls, the blink of every console indicator light, and how similar—and how different they were to those on *Farragut's* bridge. Their skippers couldn't be more different either. Pike had a reputation throughout the fleet for running a very tight ship, whereas Charlie was—had been—more like a father figure to his crew.

"Captain," the comms officer called out once more. "*Yorktown* off the port-bow. She's rendering honors, sir."

Kirk's heart leapt at the mention of Annie's new ship and he focused his gaze on the main viewport just as the other Constitution-class starship dimmed her floodlights and cut her portside running lights as she and *Enterprise* passed safely alongside one another, traveling in opposite directions.

"Officer of the Deck, return honors with my compliments to Captain Archer," Pike ordered.

"Aye, sir. Returning honors," Spock replied, speaking a bit louder than seemed necessary as he stepped over to the navigation sub-systems console next to his own station. He tapped the display, activating it, and entered the commands, then turned to face the main viewport himself and folded his hands behind his back.

Kirk stood a little straighter, a little prouder, and smiled as the automated high-pitched Boson's whistle echoed across the bridge and throughout the entire ship via the all-call. Pike noticed Kirk's smile.

"I know the new first officer," Kirk explained as Spock stepped down and stood to Pike's right.

"You've got big shoes to fill, Spock," Pike offered the Vulcan, who managed only a raised eyebrow in response. There seemed to be an awkward silence as both Spock and Kirk simply stared at the front viewport. He decided to shake the tension tree. "Kirk, I believe you and my X.O. are acquainted?"

"Yes. Good to see you again, Mister Spock," Kirk said, putting on his best attempt at a friendly smile.

"Commander," Spock replied cordially as he nodded, then turned his gaze forward again.

Pike scrutinized them both. No, this wouldn't do on his bridge.

"We don't have a problem here, do we?" Pike broke the awkward silence. Normally, he wouldn't have even indulged such a thing, but their shared history had piqued his curiosity. "Mister Spock is our ship's reigning chess champion," he finally tossed out. "Although I only see him playing against the computer anymore."

"Doesn't that get old, Mister Spock?" Kirk asked, grinning as he clearly meant to bait the Vulcan. "Losing all the time? To a computer?"

Kirk searched for any clue on the Vulcan's face. Was he still harboring ill feelings toward him?

"I presume you are questioning whether or not I have found the endeavor to have no value by nature of its unambiguous outcome. Since I have, as of yet, been unable to find another suitable opponent aboard the Enterprise who can challenge me on my level of play, I am forced to engage the computer."

"Meaning nobody else will play with him because he always wins," Pike translated, but then seemed to have an idea. "But, that sounded like a challenge to me," Pike continued as he turned to Kirk, expectantly.

"Well the game of choice on Farragut is poker," Kirk began, "but back in the day, my father was all-Starfleet Chess champion three years in a row. He taught me. I'd be happy to offer you a break from the computer."

Pike turned to look squarely at Spock, whose left eyebrow climbed halfway to his hairline.

"Indeed."

"I should probably warn you, though," Kirk pressed as Pike swung his gaze back to him. "You might find me…unconventional."

Pike turned back to study the his first officer's face again.

Spock's right eyebrow joined his left. "If you will excuse me." And with that, Spock turned and walked back up the steps to his station.

Pike's gaze lingered on him momentarily before returning to Kirk. "I don't think he's completely over it yet."

Over what, sir?" Kirk returned in a tone so ambiguous that it caught Pike by surprise. He realized then that any effort to cajole any further enlightenment about the Koby incident would be fruitless. If Spock had been ordered not to discuss it, then Kirk had as well.

"We are free and clear to navigate, sir," Tyler reported as *Yorktown* passed beyond the edge of the viewport.

"Screen forward," Pike ordered, then pressed the button on his right armrest again with the same well-practiced precision. "Engineering. Warp drive, mister Scott."

"Warp drive aye, sir," came the familiar Scottish brogue.

"Mister Tyler?" Pike looked to the helm.

"Warp one, aye, Captain," Tyler responded as he edged the control forward.

"Navigator make our course one-eleven mark fourteen," he called out.

"Course one-eleven mark fourteen, aye."

Kirk waited for the familiar resonance of the warp engines that he always felt through the soles of his boots during the jump to light speed. It wasn't there. Even the harmonic sound that accompanied it was different in pitch. Well, of course Enterprise was newer than Farragut—well not newer but it had undergone a refit. It didn't look any different from the outside, but obviously things had changed on the inside. Through the front viewport, the stars began to bleed out toward the edges,

forming a prismatic smear of light, which suddenly flashed and vanished completely only to return a moment later as they streaked by. That was, of course, just an optical illusion created by the warp 'bubble' that distorted everything like a glass lens. The bridge lights shifted from a deep blueish hue to a similarly deep red, indicating that they were now traveling at warp. Now that was smooth, he noted to himself.

"Warp one," Tyler announced.

"Make our speed warp three," Pike directed.

"Accelerating to warp three," Tyler affirmed.

With nothing to do on somebody else's bridge, Kirk shifted his gaze to Spock again. Almost as if sensing it, Spock turned and looked at him, then simply shifted his gaze past him to the front viewport.

Kirk likewise turned his attention to more pressing matters. "Captain Pike, I'd like to check in with Farragut if I could."

Pike eyed Kirk with a look just short of suspicion. "Something tells me you'd like to do this privately." Pike stood up and gestured for Kirk to follow him. "Come on."

Kirk fell into step behind Pike as he headed toward the elevator.

"You have the bridge, Mister Spock," Pike announced on their way out. Then, as the doors swished shut, cutting them off from the bridge, he said, "Deck two," and the lift began to descend, but would be a short trip just one deck down.

On *Farragut*, Charlie Garrovick used the elevator as his own private office. Centuries of shipbuilding experience, from the sea to the stars, and engineers still hadn't recognized the efficiency of putting the captain's ready room on the same level as the bridge, and not below. On *Farragut*, Charlie often bemoaned this very thing, and thus he often took to the elevator for any of his private conversations, and instead of heading to his ready room, he'd simply take the elevator for a random ride about ship in order to finish whatever conversation he needed to have. The crew knew his routine and if they saw the elevator open, they'd demur and

wait for the next car unless the skipper invited them in. Pike was different. Economical—and apparently elevators to him were for getting in and out of as quickly as possible.

The doors opened on the deck below the bridge. Even though he must have known Kirk could find his way there by himself, Pike must have felt it necessary to escort him.

"I appreciate this, sir," Kirk said, feeling the need to once again voice his apologies for his awkward presence without official explanation. It would definitely bother him if the same thing happened to him on *Farragut*.

"Look, I don't know what this is all about and that's just fine with me," Pike responded dismissively as he stopped in front of his office door, which slid open. "When you're done, join me in the main galley," Pike said as he gestured through the ready room door.

He started in, then he noticed that Pike hadn't left, but was rather still standing in the doorway pondering something. "Hell of a thing that happened."

"What's that, sir?" Kirk asked, having lost track of where their conversation had led.

"I really thought Charlie was getting better. For him to just go like that. We'd just gotten back to attend memorial services for our own Doctor Boyce when we heard. What a loss—well, I don't have to tell you that."

"Yes, sir," was all that Kirk could muster in response. He'd more or less predicted this was where the conversation had been headed, and he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to be discussing it with somebody he'd just met.

"Charlie and I were buddies at the Academy. He was a good officer and a good friend," Pike elaborated. "I read your report," he pressed on. "Every ship's captain and first officer in the fleet did."

That was news. Kirk was at a loss what to say. Suddenly he felt like every skipper in the fleet was standing next to Pike, judging him. It was unnerving and he hadn't felt quite like this since the Koby incident.

"I've been in your shoes, Kirk. About a year ago I led a hostage rescue team to Rigel Seven. I don't know what I was thinking. I had no business there, but I was worried that something as simple as a hostage exchange might go sideways with a bunch of anxious jar-heads in charge. I wanted to be there. Doc Boyce said I have control issues—but anyway, next thing I knew my entire team and I were trapped in that old deserted fortress. Some good people were lost that day. I know the numbers pale in comparison to Farragut's losses at Tycho Four, but death is death. Fortunately my former number one bailed me out that day. But I almost resigned my commission over the whole thing."

Kirk patiently kept his silence, letting Pike get to whatever point for which he was headed. Pike paused, perhaps finally realizing he had probably ambushed the young man on a subject he wasn't ready to discuss openly, but damn it all, he was going to say what he needed to say, because it needed saying, frankly.

"My point is, that even I knew nothing I could have done would have changed what happened." Pike paused a moment and looked at him squarely. "There was nothing you could have done either. Everybody in Starfleet knows that."

Kirk averted his gaze from Pike's for a moment, then back. He didn't know what to say. Pike wrapped up his speech.

"Guilt's a precious resource, Kirk. Don't hog more than your share." Then he gestured through the open door once again. "Take your time and come find me in the galley." And with that, Pike turned away and left Kirk standing by the ready room door.

CHAPTER 42

Cestus III

Dressed in greenish-brownish-grayish multi-environment field utility uniforms—the dominant tint changed with the surrounding environment—Lieutenant Commander Mitchell and Lieutenant Ross materialized mere yards away from the western rim of a highest mesa the transporter chief had been able to find in the vicinity of the desert outpost of Cestus III, well out of sight of anyone, friend or foe, who might have been in the area.

As soon as the dizzying buzz wore off, Mitchell flipped open his communicator and reported, "Transport complete. Mitchell out," then closed it and stuck it to his belt as he stepped forward and stood close to the mesa's crumbling edge. He leaned forward and gazed the hundred feet or so down over the sparsely vegetated rocky slope to the slowly shifting waves of sun-bleached sand that covered the floor of the ravine and stretched toward the hazy horizon for as far as he could see, squinting and shading his eyes against the nearly blinding yellow-white sunlight reflecting off the the dunes. It should have been right there below them somewhere, but he couldn't see it.

"I wouldn't stand close to the edge. This outcropping does not read as entirely stable," Ross remarked from a much more respectable distance as she gazed at her tricorder display.

Mitchell gave her a dismissive smirk. Then, as an afterthought, he took two casual steps backwards, hoping that she didn't see him do it. Something in the back of his mind told him this was going to be a long day.

Ross pulled off her hat and patted her sleeve against her forehead to absorb the sweat that was already beginning to bead there. She replaced her hat quickly—at least its bill would shade her eyes from the direct sunlight—then pulled back the forearm flap on her left sleeve, punched a lower suit temperature into the small controls plate, and then covered it up again.

Mitchell surprised her by reaching toward her waist where he pulled the binoculars from a pouch on her utility belt. Noticing her gaze, he furrowed his eyebrows, then turned and brought the binoculars up to his eyes, bumping his hat back on his head. He scanned back and forth across the arid terrain that he'd just been looking down on, but he still couldn't find what he was looking for. Then he remembered the outpost had a cammo field. He activated a preset, heard the gentle whine as the binoculars responded, then lifted them back to his eyes.

"There it is," he said when he finally spotted what he was looking for—several small, simple pre-fab buildings of unremarkable design, all huddled closely together along the rising base of the opposite mesa. "Not much activity."

Ross removed a hydrating packet from her belt pack and tore a corner of it off and drank from it. Somehow more liquid came out of the small pouch than it looked like it could hold. After a gulp, she looked at him.

Mitchell threw her a brief sidelong glance, then resumed looking through the binoculars. The discussion over the base security protocols they'd had in the transporter room shortly before beaming down occurred to him. The second officer had wanted to wait for a response from the base before letting them beam out, but the protocols had mandated that they select a beam-down point a discrete distance outside the base where they could be picked up and then transmit a pre-arranged code that included the coordinates of that location—a transmission to which the base would not respond in any way. That way the fact of the base's existence and its location would remain protected. It was a rather screwy arrangement in Mitchell's opinion.

He looked back down toward the outpost, although he didn't bother to use his binoculars this time so he couldn't actually see it. He ran through a few possible scenarios in his head, but quickly realized that doing so was pointless. Screw proto-

col. He yanked his communicator off his belt again and flipped it open. "Mitchell, Farragut."

"Go for Farragut," the voice of *Farragut's* comms officer came back.

"Our ride seems to be late. We're going to hoof it."

"Copy that."

"Mitchell out." He flipped his communicator closed and stuck it back on his belt.

"Come on," he finally said as he started walking toward a nearby crevice that looked like it cut deep into the mesa's edge—hopefully a way down.

Ross looked at him, looked at where we was going, and realized what he had in mind. "We'll set off their perimeter alarm," she said.

"That's kind of the idea," Mitchell then thrust out the binoculars to her. She took the binoculars from him with her free hand and returned them to her belt pouch.

Mitchell, meanwhile, had already began his descent, bracing his hand on the dusty rock as he found his footing.

Ross quickly downed what remained in her hydrating pack in two big gulps, then crushed it and tossed it aside—where it biodegraded mere moments after it hit the ground.

"I knew this guy here once…" Mitchell's voice came just as his head disappeared below the rim of the crevice.

"Here?"

"Naska, It's a starport about twenty kilometers from here," he clarified a second before one of his feet slid out from under him on some loose sandstone gravel, which tumbled like a miniature avalanche into the ravine. If the close call gave him a start, he showed no outward evidence of it…except for the white-knuckled grasp he'd locked onto his handhold when it happened. "I used to breeze through there quite a bit back when I was young and stupid."

"How long ago was that?" she asked him, her tone as deadpan as a Vulcan's while she tried to concentrate on maintaining her footing as she started side-stepping her way down the same short, steep, gravel-lettered incline that had almost meant the end for Mitchell.

"Was that a joke?" he called up to her.

"About what?" she tossed back down, along with a few pebbles she kicked loose with her foot, which clattering down onto Mitchell's head. He threw a suspicious glance back up at her which she missed.

"This was all underwater at one time," she vocalized the readings she'd taken on the tricorder moments ago. "Part of an ocean or an inland sea about a millennia ago."

"That's fascinating, professor."

She decided not to say anything to that, and after that, neither of them said anything more for the rest of the climb down. Mitchell reached the small mound of crumbled rock and debris at the base of the crevice and slid down to the sandy bottom like a snow skier. Ross slid to a stop beside him a few moments later and began to dust herself off. This drew a look and a smirk from Mitchell. "Missed a spot."

She looked at her clothes, then at him. He simply shook his head and turned to walk off.

Ross began studying her tricorder display again, then followed a few steps behind as Mitchell led the way out of the shadows at the base of the mesa and back into the harsh, hot sunlight. They walked across the sand for what seemed like several minutes before she started hearing a quiet hum—a sort of low buzzing sound. She looked up when the energy readings on her tricorder suddenly spiked, just in time to watch Mitchell vanish into thin air mid-stride, while the air around him seemed to ripple and wobble like a giant soap bubble. She extended her hand out in front of her and walked through the rippling field to the other side where Mitchell suddenly reappeared.

"Put your hand down. You look like an idiot," he said tersely, then shook his head dismissively and turned away.

Then they both gazed ahead at the unremarkable, utilitarian buildings of Cestus Outpost, nestled together in a single row so close against the base of the sheer rock cliff that they almost looked like they'd been cut out of the cliff itself. They reminded Mitchell of the dwellings built by the ancient Pueblo Indians, only at ground level and made of pre-fab formed from local materials according to the specifications laid out in pre-programmed design patterns stored in a transporter buffer. Not one to remember details of random conversations about generally boring subjects, he did actually remember a professor back at the Academy mentioning that Zefram Cochrane had the idea for the whole thing while sitting on the beach building sand castles, or so the story went.

But the outpost's construction details didn't matter right now—or ever. What did matter was where the hell everybody was. There should have been a dozen armed personnel drawing down on them by now. Nope. He glanced around the area, looking from one end of the outpost to the other for signs of life. "This is strange." He sighed. Something was wrong, and he was starting not to like it. He was starting not to like it a lot.

He looked back at Ross, who was scrutinizing her tricorder display again.

"There's no one here," she replied in a very matter-of–fact tone. Mitchell smirked and she saw it. "Other than the two of us—I scan no life forms in the vicinity."

"How many are assigned here?"

"Seven," she answered. "Two communications specialists, a facilities and equipment technician, and a four-person ops team." She looked up at him and suggested, "Maybe they went to that starport you talked about."

He ignored her as he yanked his communicator from his belt and put it to his face. "Farragut?"

"You won't be able to transmit through the camouflage field, Commander," Ross advised him. "We'll need to use the comms in the command center."

"Which building is it?" he said, glancing over the buildings as he stuck his communicator back onto his belt, mad at himself for having forgotten this, and madder still that Ross hadn't.

"That one," Ross said as she pointed at the only two-level structure in the entire complex, located in the center.

They walked up to the front of the building and found a heavy weatherized door. After a moment's thought, he reached to the handle and when he unlatched it, the door opened.

What made things immediately uncomfortable was that all the lights were out. He drew his phaser and switched off the safety, then stared hesitantly into the darkness. He thumbed the button on the side of his phaser to illuminate the flashlight above its beam emitter. Ross did likewise with her free hand.

They played their beams slowly back and forth across the entire width of the small room and then crossed them down into the murky darkness of the corridor that branched off from it.

"The command center is on the second floor," Ross said as she glanced up and into the darkness from her tricorder display.

"Why is it so damn hot in here?" Mitchell asked rhetorically as he swept his sleeve across his forehead to stop a bead of sweat from running into his eye.

"Other than the camouflage field array, all power seems to have been shut off," Ross whispered back as she once again studied her tricorder's glowing display.

Soon both found themselves shining their phaser flashlights in each others faces. Mitchell reached out and pushed her hand to the side to get the bright light out of his face. Ross noticed that her redirected flashlight beam illuminated a doorless opening with steps leading upward.

It was then that he noted that there was no signage anywhere. He aimed and played his beam slowly up the length of the stairwell, then started climbing the steps. Ross fell in step behind him.

When they reached the top they came to a closed door, which Mitchell found to be unlocked.

"Not much for security," he said as he slid the door aside to reveal a large elongated room with a single vista window that ran the entire length of the front wall. It was heavily tinted, but what little sunlight did manage to beam through was enough to sufficiently light the room. They switched off their flashlights and returned their phasers to their belts.

They had definitely found the control center…and more. A long console with four chairs sat facing the window. Five more consoles were positioned in the room's center and against the other walls, and the rest of the space was packed with all sorts of highly specialized high-tech equipment and technology, some of which neither Mitchell nor Ross could identify.

"Monitoring stations for long-range surveillance," Ross said, her gaze having fallen on some tech that she actually did recognize. "There must be some sort of sensor array somewhere—probably underground."

"So who they were surveilling? And why didn't they want them to know it?" His communicator beeped, interrupting him. He pulled it off his belt and flipped it open again. "Go for Mitchell."

"LeBlanc here, sir. You have a coded subspace message. It's Captain Kirk."

"Patch it through."

"Aye, sir. Stand by."

"Gary?" Kirk's voice inquired a moment later.

"Hey, Jim," he answered as he ran his finger across the top of the nearest console, picking up a thick layer of dust on his fingertip, which he studied curiously.

"What's the mission status?"

"Well we just got here, but there doesn't seem to be anyone around—looks like they've been gone for some time, too. How close are you?"

"Eight more hours, give or take. Listen, Gary. I need you to do something and you can't inform the crew about it. Absolute secrecy is critical."

"You're the boss," Gary remarked, a curious frown creasing his face.

"Who's with you?"

"It's just me and Ross."

"I want you to drop what you're doing and head into Naska Starport. I'm going to tell LeBlanc that I told you to stay there at the base and to maintain comms silence. Get there as quickly as you can."

"We're on our way."

"I'll meet you in that place you used to go—the casino. You know, the one owned by that idiot?"

"The Orion's Belt?"

"Right," Kirk confirmed. "Wait for me there."

"Aye, Skipper. Look for me at the poker tables."

"Kirk out."

Mitchell flipped his communicator closed and stuck it back on his belt as he turned briefly back to Ross. "You heard it. Let's go."

Five minutes later, they were shafting their flashlight beams around a small cramped bunk room in another building. Mitchell's beam came to rest on a row of tall lockers that ran the length of a wall, ending beside the open walkway to a shower room.

Mitchell reached and opened one of the lockers, which was empty. He closed it and opened the next.

"What are we looking for?" Ross asked as her beam joined his on the locker he had opened. This one was not empty, and in fact revealed some casual non-military clothing including pants and several shirts. He left the locker open and opened the next, revealing several more items. The next contained more yet. "No uniforms," she observed.

"Find something that fits," Mitchell said as he started to take off his uniform shirt.

"You don't find it strange that there aren't any uniforms in these lockers?"

"Not really," Mitchell ignored her as he had undressed down to his underwear by now. Then a little annoyed, he decided to help her out by selecting a dark black t-shirt and shoving it into her arm, forcing her to reach and clutch it rather than let it fall to the floor.

"Don't be shy." he added as he pulled a set of simple, nondescript clothes—a pair of tan cargo pants and a dark green long-sleeved pullover shirt and held the shirt against his bared torso. "There's nothing you have that I haven't seen a hundred times before."

With that, Ross reached and opened another locker, then another until she finally found a locker full of women's clothes that she seemed to find appropriate after rifling through it—a pair of cargo pants a shade lighter than his. Then without any affectation she set her phaser down on the long metallic bench in front of the lockers, its beam angled on the locker, and started to unfasten her pants before guiding them downward, exposing her long, slim and toned bared legs. She paused as she caught him looking.

"What?" he asked defensively. "Hurry up," he emphasized, raising his tone as he lifted one foot onto the bench, now donning a new boot, and adjusted it.

She leaned against the locker, stood on one foot and pulled on one leg of her new pants, switched feet, and pulled on the other leg before shimmying into the rather tight pants as she slipped them up and secured them at her waistline. She then turned away from him and lifted her own uniform shirt up and off over her head, exposing her bare back to him, which again drew his brief gaze before he averted it and concentrated on his other boot, followed by one last fleeting glance to see her pull the black t-shirt down to cover her. He slid his boot off the bench and it hit the floor with a thud.

"I do have friends," She suddenly stated as she began to don her own set of boots.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Mitchell asked, growing more annoyed as she took her time with her boots.

"I have friends."

"I'm very happy for you," he came back, perplexed.

"We even have a friend in common. On Exeter. She told me about you. She also told me about the after-hours poker games between you and Captain Tracy and some of the senior officers and how they sometimes got—I believe she said 'out of hand.'"

"Out of hand? Is that a pun? Are you making a joke? You know, Ross, I don't know what surprises me more—that your friend knew about our poker games or that you even have a friend."

"Why would me having a friend surprise you?"

"Let's find some transportation." He ended the strange conversation by turning away and starting out the door. She quickly finished with her boot and followed.

CHAPTER 43

Farragut

Lieutenant Commander LeBlanc sat proudly, straight and tall in the center seat, relishing her first real opportunity to finally put into practice the knowledge and tactical skills she'd learned during her recent stint at the Starfleet Academy Command College or SACC, even if those skills amounted for the moment to little more than maintaining orbit. She enjoyed her duties as ship's senior tactical officer or T.O., even if the skipper and his newly arrived X.O. often crowded her out from the TOPS station. Apparently they'd been best friends since childhood and had a vocal shorthand that made her feel like a fifth wheel.

Everybody heard what had happened to *Farragut* and her crew at Tycho IV. It came up in conversation even more than Koby, and by some twist of fate, involved the very same James Tiberius Kirk that had defeated Koby. After Captain Garrovick had been critically injured, Kirk became acting captain and called over his best friend Commander Gary Mitchell. With over half of the crew killed, and with another fifty or so under medical care, Starfleet called up the rising stars from the Academy to fill in. After all, this was wartime and opportunities for rapid advancement were to be had.

She felt guilty for thinking about it that way—but after all, she'd graduated at the top of her class. And now here she was in the most coveted seat in Starfleet—master and commander. She couldn't pretend it wasn't giving her the rush of a lifetime.

She gazed one after another at the officers around her, slowly pivoting her seat to include those working at stations behind her. Not only was she a new face, but except for Lieutenant Choi temporarily filling in at her normal position at

TOPS—she knew no-one. She and Choi had served together for over two years on *Potemkin* prior to her departure for the SACC. She and Choi had actually done much more than just serve together. They'd been lovers. Monogamous and committed, they'd even discussed marriage to the point of trying to figure out how they might get themselves stationed together. Then, out of the blue, she'd been offered a seat in SACC, which of course she immediately accepted. And just like that, everything changed for her and Choi. Knowing that she'd likely be transferred to another ship upon graduation, she took the initiative and ended their relationship in a not so tactful or delicate way.

Then by a twist of fate, both ended up back together here. It was awkward to say the least. Had he forgiven her? Even more awkward was the fact that on *Potemkin* they'd been equals—both lieutenants. But things were different now. She was his immediate superior officer, and he her direct subordinate.

One thing was for sure. She needed to push past the silence and awkwardness. But how?

She drew a deep breath and sighed. Then it suddenly dawned on her that one very important trait of a good ship's captain was to know the crew. A good master and commander always bonded with their crew. They got to know not just their names and their ranks and positions, but who they were—where they came from. The Starfleet brass at large were for the most part content to think of those who served as nameless, faceless heroes who often put their lives on the line for king and country. But to their skipper and their fellow shipmates they were much more. Each one of them had a name and a face.

"Lieutenant Choi and I were stationed on the starship Potemkin together," she announced before even she knew she was doing it. It was an almost out-of-body experience, but she rolled with it. All eyes, and lastly Choi's, turned toward her expectantly—and frankly—confused.

"A lot of us are replacements. Some are not. I don't know many of you. I think maybe it's time to remedy that, don't you think?"

Choi caught her gaze for the briefest of moments, but then she shifted her focus onto the young helmsman.

"What about you, Ensign? We picked you up just last week. Tell us a little something about yourself."

"Sir?" he answered almost instinctively but somewhat confused, even darting his eyes to his console as if some instrumentation might provide the report she was expecting.

"Unless you just want to continue monitoring the geosynchronous orbit status board?'

He half-smiled and turned his head just slightly to glance at everyone, then kicked it off. "Ensign Eugene Forrest. Everybody calls me 'Gene'. I just graduated the Academy a month ago. My father was killed in the Battle of Axanar." He paused with a silent look of sadness. "I guess that's why I joined Starfleet."

A chorus of quiet words of understanding filled the bridge.

"Good to have you aboard, Ensign," LeBlanc nodded to him, then hers and Choi's gazes met briefly again. This time he looked away. LeBlanc turned to the young woman sitting at the environmental controls station with her legs crossed and her arms folded across her chest.

"Lieutenant Angela Buzatto," she began, prompted by LeBlanc's raised eyebrows. "But as of two weeks ago I'm Lieutenant Angela Buzatto-McClennon."

A resound of congratulations came from all around, bringing a lovely smile to her face and apparently made her feel more comfortable because she uncrossed her legs and dropped her hands to her lap, opening herself up a little more before she continued.

"My husband and I were going to transfer to Starbase Three together after our honeymoon, but when the call went out for temporary replacements, well, I sort of jumped at the chance for a bridge post.

"Good for you." LeBlanc offered her a smile. This time hers and Choi's met for a little longer. She let a kind half-smile escape, which he returned. She turned her chair slightly to the communications station.

"Lieutenant J.G. Craig Reynolds," the comms officer began, sounding almost apologetic. "Friends call me Renny. I don't know any of you all either. I was assigned here a year ago." There was a hushed response as Renny shrugged. "I lost all my friends at Tycho." He paused as everyone hung on his every word. "I survived because I was in the elevator. I'd just left my quarters on my way to the bridge when it attacked. All my friends are gone."

The room was silent. "Good to have you on the bridge, Renny," LeBlanc nodded with a compassionate smile

Suddenly the prox alert began to blare. "De-warp signature! Choi spun to face forward and pressed the button to raise the viewer up out of the TOPS console. Everyone else snapped back to focus on their tasks.

LeBlanc stood up and stepped up beside Choi—as he pressed his eyes to his viewer.

"I lost them." Choi said as he backed off the viewer. Then, realizing that LeBlanc was standing at his shoulder, he looked up and met her eyes, hesitated for only the briefest of moments, and then reported, "They de-warped so close to the planet they were able to duck in behind it before I could get a fix."

She leaned in past his shoulder, forcing him to lean to the side out of her way, and gazed into the viewer herself. Then, as she gazed at a tactical display of space ahead of them, she suddenly realized that she was doing to him exactly what she resented Kirk and Mitchell when they did it to her. She quickly backed off, looked him in the eye, and said a quiet, "Sorry," she found herself saying. "I can't stand it when someone does that to me."

"You can do whatever you want. You're skipper," he said, and then she noticed he was smiling.

She found herself smiling back, holding his gaze for a moment longer. She missed that smile.

"You think it might be Enterprise, sir?" Forrest broke into the moment.

She narrowed her eyes through the viewport at Cestus' hazy brown and white horizon, and while she did briefly consider the unlikely possibility that what he had seen could have been Enterprise , she just as quickly dismissed it. Enterprise could not possibly have arrived yet. She would have to have been traveling well in excess of warp eight, and Captain Pike had no cause to push his ship like that. No, Enterprise was most likely still at least several hours out.

"More likely smugglers," she concluded with a confidence that she wasn't sure she actually felt. "It's an old trick. De-warp as close as you can to a planet to avoid being detected." She gave him a reassuring smile and a hand on his shoulder. "Probably headed to that spaceport."

"Aye, sir," the helmsman smiled with relief.

The floor of the bridge suddenly bucked upward and LeBlanc gripped the armrest hard and threw her free hand on the armrest as well.

"Shields!" she shouted, wide-eyed as she pulled herself into the chair and adjusted her position.

"Oh shit!" Choi shouted above the screaming proximity alert as everything around them shook violently. "Direct hit on warp core containment array!" Then after a few swipes of the instrumentation, he paused with a look of dread on his face as he stared at the front viewport. "Klingon D-6 battlecruiser z-minus eight-thousand meters!"

LeBlanc hurled her gaze at the front viewport to see a menacing gray-green stingray-like Klingon D-6 battlecruiser rising up from beneath the shroud of the planet's atmosphere at them. Another salvo lashed out from the nacelle disruptor cannons of the battlecruiser.

"Emergency evasive!"

"Aye, sir!" Forrest acknowledged as he was already frantically swiping at his console.

"Brace!" Choi yelled as everyone who hadn't so far, rapidly yanked their seat-straps over their shoulders and secured them.

The ship rumbled and shook violently again as LeBlanc heard someone yell above the din, "Forward shield array down!"

"Got another ship!" the helmsman warned as he brought the image up on split-screen.

"Evasive pattern delta five!" LeBlanc shouted back at him. It was a famous maneuver and part of basic Academy training, which mattered little now. Still Forrest furiously smashed at his console, but by the time he'd entered the maneuver into his board it was it was irrelevant.

"Hold on!" she yelled, even though she herself had neglected to do more than slip her fingers beneath the still stowed seat straps of her seat, gripping them tightly as her knuckles whitened.

The second battlecruiser's disruptors struck *Farragut's* unprotected hull somewhere atop the saucer and ahead of the bridge. The ship pitched violently downward, tossing those not strapped in into the air like ragdolls before the inertial dampeners could react to tether them.

LeBlanc saw it coming as she sailed over the helm-nav console, and she knew there was nothing she could do to avoid it. Her fingers burned from the seat strap she no longer held, and her right wrist and shoulder ached from the yank she got as she flew from her chair. She barely had a moment to draw a sharp breath and try to brace herself before she slammed upside down and sideways into the end of the railing to the left of the main screen. She heard ribs crack like so many dried twigs and felt searing pain like an electrical shock course through her entire left side as she flipped over the railing and tumbled face first into the viewport, just as a large chunk of debris struck hard against the outside, cracking the screen's exterior before bouncing off into space.

"Kelly!" Choi shouted as he leapt to his feet, still holding onto his console—the only thing that had saved him being hurled from it. Forrest had done the same. He started to sidestep out from behind it, but then stopped himself. They were in com-

bat and he was the tactical officer. His first duty was to the ship and her crew, and Kelly would want him to perform it. He faced the back as he returned to his seat. "Get a medical team up here!" he shouted to the comms officer.

LeBlanc tried to call out but nothing came. She simply couldn't draw a breath. She was dying and she knew it. She was dying, and the last thing she saw through the hundreds of tiny points of sparkling yellow light that were dancing before her eyes as she started sliding down the cold transparent aluminum surface was the crack in the screen growing larger and the second battlecruiser bearing down on them from above, its forward torpedo launcher glowing redder than her blood as it powered up to fire.

CHAPTER 44

Behind Enemy Lines

Mitchell dragged his warm, damp sleeve across his forehead and upper lip to wipe away the gritty layer of salty, sweat-soaked grime that had been collecting there ever since they left the outpost. Then he quickly grabbed hold of the armored command vehicle's steering yoke again and yanked it hard to the right to negotiate a sudden sharp curve in the narrow canyon that he hadn't realized they were coming up on until it was almost too late. Actually, to call it a canyon was being decidedly generous. In reality it wasn't much more than an extra-wide foot trail that snaked its way along the desert canyon floor amidst the sheer rocky cliffs of the barren, sun-parched mesas. As the ACV banked hard and made the turn, a swirling cloud of dirt and sand blew off of the narrowing canyon walls and in through the open windows, making both him and Ross cough and gasp for air.

The outpost's large underground garage had housed quite a variety of old vehicles, some of which had looked like they'd never run again. Most of them had obviously been designed for very specific purposes, such as deep desert probing, raw materials excavation, or even well digging, and one had looked like some sort of mobile combined sensor-scanner package whose exact purpose would no doubt remain a mystery to them. But the strangest thing of all about those vehicles as a group was the fact that not one of them bore any kind of Starfleet insignia or identification of any kind.

It was Ross who had chosen the ACV after finding it parked in the darkest corner of the garage. It was definitely of Tellerite design. The Tellerites were well known for their non-discriminatory arms industry. Their biggest corporations manufactured a wide range of weapons, munitions, and other related hardware

and then sold them to an even wider range of clients throughout the Federation and probably beyond. Their customers ranged from private military forces to law enforcement and, more often than not, the black market as well. They never customized their wares for specific buyers, so with no markings or other identifying features of any kind. Fortunately this would work well for them in Naska. He and Ross would draw little attention.

They weren't thirty minutes into what he knew was going to be an hours-long journey through the open desert, and already the cramped cockpit had heated up to stifling under the blazing hot desert sun. They'd opened their windows, such as they were, but the hot, dusty, whirlwind of a breeze that that created hadn't helped a whole lot. Even swirling around them like a miniature hurricane, the air was so thick with humidity and dust that it made breathing and seeing where they were going difficult. "Of all the vehicles and you chose this piece of junk."

"Why did you bring those winter jackets?" she asked as her gaze fell on something in the back seat.

"Thank me later." Mitchell said but otherwise ignored her.

"I was just asking," her tone seemed almost defensive.

Mitchell glanced over at her again, more covertly, out of the corner of his eye. He dropped his gaze to the front of her thin white t-shirt. She was a slender woman. Then he looked down at her legs and noted how her cargo pants hugged her slim feminine curves. He thought about those curves many times since first meeting her. Having finally gotten his first really good look at them when he watched her change clothes back at the outpost, they were spectacular. Suddenly he noticed she was looking at him and he looked up and forward again. Did she know he'd been checking her out?

Then he thought about the jackets. There were sure a heck of a lot of them, which when set against nobody being there at all, seemed to indicate they hadn't gone into Naska. So where did they go? Then he began to wonder why Jim wanted to meet up in Naska. What the hell was going on?

"Did you not find it strange that the base was abandoned?" Ross suddenly asked, as if she had read his mind.

"You talk like a school teacher," Mitchell said dismissively, then paused. "Yes, I found it strange," Mitchell stated in an increasingly annoyed tone but offered nothing further. Then he noticed in his peripheral vision that she was studying him as if she were waiting for him to say something more. When nothing came, she lifted her tricorder and began to tinker with it. For some reason that bothered him, and it wasn't the noise it made either, because pretty much nothing could be heard over the noise of the ACV. He reached across, snapped the mini-display closed and snatched it from her hands, and tossed it over his shoulder into the back seat where it landed on the winter coats. She seemed to take the hint without reaction, but a moment later she started sifting around in her seat and tugging at her trousers.

"There's nothing out here. Trust me," he snapped. "You're really fidgety for a Vulcan," he offered unfiltered, then wished he hadn't.

"I'm not a Vulcan—and that is a stereotype," she advised him.

"What?"

"Though as a child I *did* attend the Vulcan School on Earth—"

Mitchell slammed his foot down on the brake pedal, throwing both of them hard against their safety harnesses and bringing the ACV skidding to a dust-swirling halt in the half-light of the narrow canyon.

"Listen, Ross, when I say something? You don't necessarily have to respond. Rhetorical. Does that word mean anything to you?" He paused long enough to see her take a breath then cut right in, "See?" he exclaimed, cutting her off just as her lips parted to speak. "You were just going to say something. Not necessary. Not always. Silence is golden."

He held her gaze for a few moments, studying her. She closed her lips and blandly gazed back at him without the slightest hint of an expression on her face. Not entirely satisfied, he faced forward again, did a double-take, then gripped the steering yoke, and with one last fleeting sidelong glance, saw her turn her attention

forward to sit quietly. He pressed his foot on the accelerator and the ACV sped forward on its cushion of air.

For the next few minutes they rode in total silence, with only to the engine drone and the buffeting of the hot wind through the open windows. Somewhere along the way Mitchell started feeling a tinge of guilt over his tirade. He looked over at Ross and watched her sitting there quietly, her puppy dog eyes gazing forward from beneath her dark bangs, her pouty lips…looking rather adorable, if he was being honest with himself. He suddenly realized that he needed a stiff drink, or therapy, or both, because he was seriously contemplating offering an apology for his outburst.

His entire demeanor suddenly changed and he slammed his foot on the brake pedal again.

"What?" Ross declared in her own defense and in only one word, turning to him as the vehicle came to a halt once more.

"Quiet!" Mitchell barked, raising his hand between them.

Her academy training deeply ingrained into every fiber of her being, Ross instantly fell silent. But then her mind reengaged and overtook her instinct, and she asked in a quieter tone, "What is it?"

"Shhhh!" He hissed as his hand suddenly shot across the space between them and he pressed his palm over her lips. They sat there in silence, his head cocked through the open window.

"I thought I heard something," he whispered after a few moments.

"What did you hear?" she mumbled beneath his hand.

Her lips felt soft against his fingers. He frowned, then looked over at her and smirked. "There's just no shutting you up is there?"

He turned toward his window again and they sat there in silence for a few moments more, then he tensed."There!" He pulled his hand away from her mouth and threw open his door and jumped out into the swirling but settling dust cloud that their abrupt halt had kicked up. Then he stood there, intently studying the

long crease of clear blue sky high up between the shadows of the narrow canyon walls.

Ross climbed out and just stared overtop the vehicle at him until he turned to her with his hand outstretched.

"Give me—" then he remembered and smirked, and then opened the back door and leaned inside. He found Ross' tricorder and looked at the display as he backed out of the vehicle, then started making adjustments.

"What did you hear?"

"Sonic boom." He frowned at the display, then handed the tricorder over the roof to her. She took it and studied it before making a couple adjustments, and by the time she looked up again, Mitchell had already grabbed the binoculars and was clambering up another narrow crevice in the side of the canyon wall. She stuffed the tricorder into the lower wide pocket of her pants and quickly followed after him.

It was a relatively easy climb as climbing went, but the going was slow in the oppressive heat. It took several minutes for Mitchell to reach the top of the mesa, but when he finally did, he scrambled up the last short incline and quickly turned around and around as he moved away from the edge, scanning the sky with the binoculars in all directions. Ross arrived next to him shortly afterwards and pulled the tricorder from her belt pouch.

They stood there in near total silence, side-by-side, with sand dust and grit skittering and scratching across the rocky ground in the hot gentle breeze making the noise. Mitchell alternated between gazing through the binoculars and shading his naked eyes against the oppressive sun, searching the blue-white sky all around them for the source of what he was sure he'd heard—an aircraft of some kind—while Ross kept quiet vigil over her tricorder's display screen. It occurred to him that it could just be any number of spacecraft making a final descent into Naska, but this was an odd vector for an approach.

Nothing. No high-altitude vapor trails scarring the unbroken atmosphere. But there had to be something, somewhere. He started to turn—

Two more sonic booms thundered across the sky and echoed off the distant mesas behind them. This time both of them heard it and spun in the other direction and scoured the horizon.

"Several large objects in that direction, about seventy-five degrees," Ross said, pointing off into the sky while still looking at her tricorder display. "Unable to identify the configuration." Mitchell turned in the direction she was pointing and raised the binoculars back to his eyes. "On a very erratic course and descending rapidly." she offered, clearly puzzled at the readings.

She watched as he swept his binoculars back and forth across the sky where she had indicated.

"Maybe we should contact Farragut?" she proposed.

He paused a moment. "They would have broken radio silence if it was important…" Mitchell's voice trailed off as he froze, locking his binoculars onto something.

Still set for wide angle view, Mitchell saw a tiny, fire-red speck of flickering light dragging a charcoal gray and black smoke trail slowly across the sky.

"Ship burning up on re-entry. Big one." He pressed the magnification switch and the fire-red speck suddenly grew into a blazing inferno of burning wreckage and ignited plasma that filled his entire field of view. As he watched, the smoke trails from the larger pieces split into several dozen smaller debris trails, each one following its own slightly different trajectory and slowly turning white as they fell farther and farther behind the larger plume and dove toward the distant desert floor. It had obviously suffered some kind of catastrophic failure, and it was clearly already too late to stop the inevitable. Whatever it was, it was over for the crew by now because the ship was completely engulfed in a fiery blaze.

Mitchell's blood suddenly ran cold. The trailing piece of large debris was the leading edge of a large disk-shaped object. He recognized it instantly as it drew closer. It was the primary hull of a Federation starship. It was *Farragut*.

"Oh God." were the only words that fell from his lips as he lowered the binoculars from his eyes, which remained locked on the falling wreckage.

"What?" Ross asked.

Mitchell still couldn't avert his gaze as he handed the binoculars off to her and whipped out his communicator, flipping it open as he brought it up in front of him. "Mitchell to Farragut!" he shouted into it. "Mitchell to Farragut!" Nothing. He entertained a remote moment's chance that he might reach one of any number of evacuation shuttles, but he got nothing.

Ross raised the binoculars to her eyes as it suddenly dawned on her what was happening, and she saw it too. Then she quickly stuffed them under her armpit and brought up the tricorder up to scan the sky again, this time knowing exactly what she was scanning for. Mitchell kept shouting into his communicator, repeating his desperate call over and over, but her tricorder display clearly confirmed their worst fears.

She turned her gaze toward Mitchell, who upon noticing finally stopped shouting into his communicator and met her gaze. They stood there for a moment just staring at one another, until Mitchell held his hand out to her. She pushed the tricorder into his hand. He took it and locked his gaze onto the display.

"Completely gone," she stated the obvious in a hushed whisper of disbelief, as if the evidence of their own eyes weren't enough to make it real.

They fell silent again, beset by utter shock and disbelief as they watched the blazing fireball drop below the distant horizon, leaving only its slowly widening vapor trails to mark its passage.

"What could have happened?" Ross asked, her voice wavering almost imperceptibly with uneasiness. When Mitchell didn't answer, she added, "Was she attacked?"

"I don't know, Ross," Mitchell snapped more sharply than he'd intended to. He was just as unnerved as she was. "Probably." A pang of panic hit him. They were completely alone, and for all intents and purposes, behind enemy lines—but which enemy? He had no way of knowing yet. Klingons? Probably. Either way, they were on their own.

"Give me your communicator." When Ross only gave him a curious look in response, he stepped up to her and reached around behind her and yanked it from her belt. He tossed it on the ground, then tossed his own communicator and the tricorder down with it. Then he pulled his phaser, adjusted the setting, and vaporized all three devices in a deadly blue-white beam of energy, leaving only a small plate of rough burned-sand glass to mark the spot where they had lain.

"Why did you do that?" Ross asked him calmly.

"If Farragut was attacked, we don't want whoever did it tracking us," Mitchell answered..It suddenly hit him that he had just tried to call *Farragut* on the now obliterated communicator. If someone had tracked that transmission…

"Come on!" He gave Ross a shove and then led the way back toward the narrow seam in the canyon wall. "Move your bony ass!" he yelled as he took his first step down into the crevice, but Ross had already been running to catch up to him and had to skid on her heels and fall onto her backside to avoid running right over the edge.

"If it was the Klingons, what are they doing here?" she asked as the last of her momentum threw her into him and nearly sent him plunging to his death.

"I told you I don't know!" he barked, forgoing all caution in his rapid descent down through the rest of the crevice. "But we're not going to wait around to find out!" When his feet finally hit the ground he broke into an all-out sprint for the vehicle, with Ross hot on his heels.

Mitchell jumped into the driver's side seat so fast that by the time Ross had scurried around to the passenger side and landed her own seat he had it running and up off the ground, stomping the accelerator down to the floor before she had a chance to fasten herself as and the vehicle shot forward like a torpedo from its launcher, throwing them both hard into their seats.

With its engine screaming in protest, the vehicle reached its top speed within seconds and started shaking as if it were going to blow itself apart. Mitchell's grip on the steering yoke squeezed the blood from his knuckles as he yanked it right

and then left and then back again, negotiating the sharp twists and turns, kicking up a trail of dust and sand behind them.

"We need cover!" Mitchell yelled over the engine noise. "Look for something!"

Ross broke out the binoculars again and then reached up toward the center of the ceiling behind her to push open the turret hatch, but she couldn't reach the release. She got up and turned around, holding onto whatever she could to avoid falling into Mitchell's lap as she rested one knee in her seat and the other on the center platform. Despite having braced herself as best she could, the sudden twists and turns in the road still threw her against him over and over, brushing her breast into the side of his face almost every time as she struggled to open the stubborn hatch. Then, when it finally opened, she carefully stepped up onto the platform and stood up through the opening.

As if the distraction of Ross' shapely hip just inches from his face and the need to cover as much ground as quickly as possible weren't bad enough, Mitchell was starting to find the narrowing walls of the canyon pass to be increasingly claustrophobic. He only hoped that he wasn't driving them toward a dead end.

Ross looked up through the binoculars between the narrow canyon walls at the river of blue sky overhead. "I see something—landing craft of some kind! Maybe thirty! Judging by the direction they're headed, I do not think they have detected us!"

Mitchell didn't know what was worse—all those landing craft or the increasingly narrow canyon walls.

He hadn't been to Naska in over three years, but he knew from looking around on the top of the mesa moments ago that the mile-high mountain ranges where Naska was lay across the huge expanse of a flat, dry inland sea basin where the mesas ended. Crossing it meant nearly a day out in the open. Exposed. What was it his friend Harry said once during one of their little treasure-hunting jaunts to Naska? "Everything out there is either dead or dying." Besides being an all-around asshole, Harry was a dreamer, a treasure-hunter and a smuggler all rolled into one. Myth had it that there was an ancient city with all sorts of riches to be had by whoever could find the damn place. Harry couldn't find it, but both of them did

find the casinos in the much less mythical city of Naska. Riches could be had there as well, but most of them were left by suckers in the casinos. Not one to give up on his obsession, Harry never left Naska, and in fact now ran one of the older casino's there. Most cadets headed off to Risa or Argelius, he came here, and on one occasion, had dragged Jim along. Both would probably have been booted from the Academy had someone found out because Cestus was off-limits. In fact, that particular trip was the one and only time Jim had ever actually threatened to end their friendship. Strange that fate had conspired to bring them back again. Even when discussing the mission details, neither brought up Naska or anything related to it—that was until Jim did when he said to meet him in Harry's casino.

What the hell is going on? The voice in his head demanded.

A sudden sharp outcropping of rock caused Mitchell to stomp his foot down on the brake pedal and yank the steering yoke to the right, knocking Ross off balance and hurling her firm backside square in his face as the vehicle careened to one side. When it straightened and leveled off again, they were facing a steep downward slope and a short distance of level ground that led into a large cut at the base of the almost vertical cliff wall, forming a dark cavern beneath the mesa whose depth was lost in the shadows. He accelerated down over the embankment, kicking up clouds of dust and sand and loose gravel that pinged against the vehicle's underside like grenade shrapnel.

And then, suddenly, he realized that the tunnel-like opening wasn't nearly as high as he'd thought.

"Get down!" he yelled as he grabbed at the waistband of her pants, realizing that she must not have been looking ahead. But they were so tight on her that he couldn't grab onto them, so he threw his right arm around her hips and yanked her down hard.

The last thing Ross saw as Mitchell spun her around and pulled her down was the rapidly approaching overhang of rock that would surely have cut her in two had he been a second slower. She dropped down hard into his lap just as they passed into darkness and then scurried back into her own seat.

A frightening thought raced through Mitchell's mind even as the cavern ceiling raced by just inched above the top of the windshield. What if the ceiling had been even lower—too low for their vehicle to pass beneath? He cringed at the thought of what might have happened to them.

As he sped deeper into the dark cavern, rocks pinging off the ACV's undercarriage like grenade shrapnel as he gripped the steering yoke so tightly that his knuckles were beginning to ache, he spotted a small bright blob of light in the distance that slowly grew as they approached it. A way out, thank God. The cavern was actually a tunnel cut out by some ancient river, just as he had hoped. But aside from the light at its end everything was lost in utter darkness. He could only hope there weren't any outcroppings or large boulders or who knew what else ahead of them—or just as bad, any stretches of tunnel that might narrow enough to bring their vehicle to a grinding, crashing halt, wedging it in tight forever, them along with it.

Deciding that it might be a good idea to let the landing craft Ross had spotted gain some distance on them, he lifted his foot off of the accelerator and allowed the vehicle to slow to a stop just a few meters from the mouth of the tunnel, veering to the right to bring the passenger side as close to the right wall as he could—scraping it, in fact—to make sure he'd have enough room to open his door.

He shut off the engine and took a moment or two to enjoy the silence almost as much as he was enjoying the relatively cooler air. Then he grabbed the binoculars and threw open his door, banging it hard against the tunnel wall as he climbed out. He had to shut it again to squeeze by the front of the vehicle, and as he did so he felt the engine heat radiating through the vehicle's body enveloping his legs.

Ross scooted across the seats and pushed his door open again, climbed out, shut it, and followed him toward the blinding daylight.

Mitchell moved to his left as he approached the opening of the tunnel and pressed his back against the rocky wall, then brought the binoculars up to his eyes and started searching the skies. He heard the distant whining pitch of an approaching aircraft engine. Then, suddenly, a heavily armored landing craft screamed overhead at a relatively low altitude. Mitchell instinctively stepped backwards, shrink-

ing into the shadows until the craft and the whine it made disappeared behind the high canyon wall, its stubby wingtips scratching faint trails of thin white vapor across the sky. Another one passed, and then another—and then more, some in pairs, others in groups of three—more than thirty of them in all by the time the last one screamed past.

"Klingon troop transports." Mitchell rasped as he lowered the binoculars and leaned back against the tunnel wall as the noise of the engines faded into the distance. Obviously, the Klingons were responsible for Farragut's destruction, and their arrival on Cestus could be an opening move toward a surprise attack. Things had gotten bad in the short time he and Ross had been on the surface. Now they were truly stranded behind enemy lines with no one to call on for help.

"Do you think they saw us?" Ross asked him.

"I don't think so," Mitchell replied, still partially absorbed in the torrent of his thoughts. Did they know about the secret outpost? "They're headed toward Naska," he said plainly as the reality of their situation dawned on him.

"What are we going to do?" Ross asked.

"Exactly what the skipper ordered us to do," Mitchell came back in a tone of voice filled with resolve as he reached up and dragged his sleeve through the thick sweat-soaked grime caked on his forehead again. "We're going to Naska."

CHAPTER 45

Enterprise

One thing Kirk had noted about Captain Christopher Pike from the start was that he was 'always on.' He didn't turn into someone else off duty or behind closed doors—elevators or otherwise. What you saw was what you got. He certainly couldn't imagine Pike sitting down for a late night game of poker with his senior officers the way Charlie Garrovick had often done on *Farragut*—especially with one Vulcan in particular, whom Leonard McCoy had once said, "…had all the personality of a shadow of a person who wasn't there in a dark room that wasn't there."

Something he had noticed since arriving here was that he felt as though he was suddenly on display. Nearly all of the *Enterprise* crew he'd encountered gave him looks of recognition—a look he knew only all too well. In the past it almost always came followed with questions about *Kobayashi Maru*. This time, though, he knew those looks were related to the Tycho catastrophe because no questions followed. Pike in fact was the only one to even broach the subject with him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the elevator doors swishing open onto the bridge.

He stepped out and on hearing Pike's voice, turned to see 'always on' Captain Pike standing with his comms officer.

"Enterprise calling Farragut," the comms officer repeated. "Enterprise calling Farragut. This is Enterprise calling Farragut. Please respond." Pike noticed Kirk and gave him a look somewhere between resign and annoyed. "Should I be expecting a response or is there something else I don't know?"

Pike's tone struck him with a bit of a chill, considering the more personal conversation they'd shared earlier. He felt strange, holding such monumental secrets back from a starship captain on that captain's own ship—on his own bridge—but he had no choice.

"That's what I thought." Pike threw Kirk a frown, obviously annoyed but dealing with it. "Cancel hail," he told his comms officer firmly. "If they want to talk to us, they know how."

"Captain," the comms officer called out. "I have comms coming in."

"Farragut?" Pike quickly turned and asked.

"No, sir," the young officer replied. "Starfleet Command," the seemingly confused young lieutenant began, "it's unencrypted."

Pike turned his chair around to face him again. "Unencrypted?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant confirmed. "It's being transmitted totally in the clear."

Pike glanced at Kirk once more and then ordered, "On speaker."

Ogawa flipped a switch, pressed a button, and pulled the earpiece from his ear, and a moment later the bridge filled with a deep, though not-so-practiced voice of authority mid-sentence.

"...Starfleet Command calling Enterprise, By direct order of Vice-Admiral Bernard S. Gavin, Chief of Starfleet Operations, your mission to rendezvous with Starship *Farragut* to deliver Commander James T. Kirk to same is hereby superceded. Enterprise is directed to reverse course immediately and proceed with all haste back to sector zero-zero-one, where Commander Kirk will disembark and Enterprise will receive new mission orders. Signed, Lance D. Cartwright, Lieutenant Commander, Adjutant to the Chief of Starfleet Operations."

"Transmission ends," Ogawa advised.

"Cartwrignt?" Pike thought out loud, then turned his full glare on him. "Starting to get a little pissed off here, Kirk."

"Captain," Kirk interjected, "we can't just turn around and go back without knowing why Farragut isn't responding to hails."

"If it matters at all, I agree completely," Pike assured him, a measure of understanding having crept into his gaze. "Mister Ogawa, prepare a message to Starfleet Command. All attempts to contact Farragut have been unsuccessful. Suspect Farragut to be in need of immediate assistance. My intention is to initiate search. Signed, Pike, etcetera etcetera. Priority one, Lieutenant."

"Right away, sir," the comms officer acknowledged.

"*Prepare* it—don't send it until I tell you to." Pike then turned on Kirk, whose face betrayed surprise at Pike's seeming deviation from standard protocol.

"My office, Kirk."

CHAPTER 46

Cestus III

They'd had no choice but to leave the safety of the narrow valleys, deep gorges and towering sun-parched mesas far behind, along with whatever brief respite from the sweltering midday heat the tunnel's relatively cooler air had afforded them. The only thing still laying between them and the hazy snowcapped mountain range spanning the horizon for as far as they could see now were expansive arid flatlands, sparsely dotted with bulbous tufts of dull yellow desert dry-grass, but otherwise as barren looking as the surface of Mars. Somewhere nestled high up among those defiantly distant peaks was Naska Starport. At just over four kilometers above sea-level—if there were actually a sea anywhere on the planet, the chilly air was going to feel good after so many hours baking in the desert.

He and Ross both still had their windows down, because hot swirling air was still better than hot stagnant air. As a result, his lips were dry and cracking and he could actually taste the fine gritty desert dust that had coated every surface of the ACV's interior that it could possibly reach.

He glanced over at Ross and noticed that it had done the same to her. Her lips were even bleeding a little bit, and she had collected enough dust in her bangs to make it look as though she were sporting blond highlights. As he watched her gazing out through the windshield, he wondered if she was secretly longing for the cold chill of mountain air the way he was, but he decided not to ask and just faced forward again instead. The last thing he wanted was to get into another conversation with her.

To pass the time, he began to ponder various ways he could kill Harry. Maybe he'd toss him in the ACV with Ross and make him drive with her across the de-

sert. No, not even Harry deserved that kind of death. But whatever way he planned to dispatch the idiot, first he had to ask him for help. So inconvenient.

"I knew Penelope," Ross suddenly stated matter-of-factly, interrupting the engine's monotonous drone and thoughts of premeditated murder.

He glanced over at her and met her gaze. "What?"

"We were roommates at the Academy."

"Bullshit," he replied, not because he didn't believe her, and that came through in his tone, but rather because he didn't want to believe her. "Penelope Sosa? You were not. You're lying."

He saw her look over at him out of the corner of his eye and could have sworn if he'd had to that she raised her eyebrow at him. "I have no reason to lie," she assured him.

He persisted. "No. Penelope's roommate was—" then he stopped short, thinking.

"Was someone you never met because she spent most of her free time in the science lab."

"I don't believe you," Mitchell was adamant.

"I did walk in on you two once. You were both in bed—"

"What?" his voice rose sharply bordering on a shriek. He'd done so many things that he shouldn't have in his Academy days—none of them serious violations, but many of them best forgotten to say the least. He could think of at least a dozen of them off the top of his head that he hoped to God she hadn't walked in on and witnessed. Especially those that involved him and Penelope. "When?"

"Second year," Ross clarified, "Right after fall semester. I walked in. You and Penelope were in bed together."

"You are...so full of shit!" Mitchell exclaimed. He gave Ross a long glare, but she simply stared back unfazed, saying nothing, "That was *not* you."

"I assure you, it was," she countered. "The room was dark, the lights in the hallway were bright…"

"You're so full of—what was I wearing?"

"Nothing. You were naked," she answered matter-of-factly and he realized he'd walked right into it.

"I was—" he was clearly flustered. "That was not you." The very idea that she had seen him naked tingled up his spine. "That was not you," he proclaimed once more as if he could will it so.

"Where did you get that holographic tattoo on your left shoulder blade?"

"Shut up!"

She studied him curiously for another moment, then turned her eyes forward again and concluded, "Do I annoy you?"

"What?" he bellowed, snatching the binoculars from his eyes to glare at her. "Actually yes! Especially right now."

Suddenly the engine fell silent and the ACV began to slow, finally to a dead stop. He pressed the button to restart the engine. It cranked a couple of times and then stopped. He tried again and got the same result.

"God damn it!" He threw open his door, climbed out, then marched around to the front of the vehicle. She hesitated for a moment, then climbed out to join him just as he threw open the front engine cover and stood there staring at it.

"You wouldn't happen to be a mechanic?" he asked without looking at her.

Ross said nothing. She simply leaned in and reached into the compartment with both hands and started checking various components as Mitchell watched.

"Sand in the intake," she explained as she began to tinker and brush her hand across something then paused, "Need something to seal it better." She said as she straightened and thought for a moment, then started off around the back of the ACV before Mitchell stopped her.

"Where are you going?"

"I saw a toolbox in the back."

"Hold on a sec," Mitchell said as he reached for her belt and pulled the binoculars from the pouch. As soon as he had them, she continued around him and around to the back of the ACV.

'It's amazing this piece of junk got us this far,' Mitchell thought, then turned and climbed up the small rise where he lay flat on his stomach at its top. He rested his elbows on the ridge to steady the binoculars as much as possible as he raised them to his eyes. He scanned the distant mountain range on the horizon as waves of heat rippled through the image, distorting it to where he couldn't discern much of anything.

He rose up onto his knees and elbows and backed down off the rise, then jumped to his feet and jogged back to Ross and the ACV. She was bent forward with only her legs and backside visible beneath the cowling of the vehicle.

"How's it coming," he asked after looking a little too long.

"It should hold enough for us to get where we need to go," she answered as she continued tinkering out of sight. "Finished," she declared as she backed up and stood up. She gave him a brief look, then with some sort of tool in her hand, she once again headed off to the back of the ACV.

"Close it up?" Mitchell called toward the back of the ACV.

"Yes," came her response.

Mitchell closed the engine cover, and then both of them climbed inside and back into their seats without a word.

He pressed the button to start the engine. It pulsed twice and hesitated, then pulsed once more and powered up. He looked at Ross, met her gaze. "Good job," then he raised the vehicle up off the ground, floored the accelerator, and steered it forty-five degrees off to their right.

"We need to make up some time."

CHAPTER 47

Enterprise

Captain Pike stood straight and tall, stiff and tense with his back to Kirk, his arms folded in front of him, his gaze burning through his office window at the infinity of stars hanging motionless in space, quietly reeling from the fantastic tale that Kirk had just spun.

It was like something out of a mystery thriller, chock full of intrigue, with danger lurking around every dark corner. Charlie Garrovick being murdered. A shape-shifting assassin's attack in the night. A high-speed chase through the streets of Manhattan. Nefarious and powerful figures conspiring in the shadows behind their governments' backs.

But the kicker was the incredible revelation that George Kirk was still alive—fourteen years after his death. It was too much. The hesitant but chilling tone in Kirk's voice as he stumbled through it all told him all he needed to know,. His skin not only crawled, but felt like it was trying to lift itself away from his entire body.

Kirk had certainly been through the fire more than once: Losing his father when he was a child; witnessing the holocaust on Tarsus IV; almost being kicked out of the Academy; half of his ship's crew being wiped out at Tycho IV. Now this.

He focused on Kirk's almost holographic reflection in the window, seemingly floating beyond in the vacuum of the cosmos. "That's one hell of a story, Kirk," he finally replied, speaking tentatively and in a low monotone, trying not to betray just how much it had affected him. "What am I supposed to do with all this?"

"When I figure it out, I'll tell you," he responded, almost flippantly, to which Pike reacted by dropping his arms and turning around, stepping close to him to look him right in the eyes.

"What?" Pike simply asked, hushed, but heavy with an undertone of irritation to which he felt obliged to qualify, but Pike continued before he could."Do you realize the magnitude of what you're saying?"

Kirk started to open his mouth to answer, but the bosun's page cut him off. "Bridge to Captain Pike," Lieutenant Ogawa's voice immediately followed.

"Go for Pike," he responded, his gaze still locked with Kirk's.

"Priority-one message from Starfleet Command, Captain."

"Again?" Pike all but bellowed. "For who?"

"For Commander Kirk, sir, but they're directed to you as well."

Pike and Kirk exchanged another glance.

"Read them back." Pike huffed in frustration.

"Commander James T. Kirk is hereby field-promoted to the rank of captain and is ordered to assume full command of Farragut immediately. Captain Pike is hereby directed to render all available resources to assist Captain Kirk to carry out those orders. Signed, T'Pol, Admiral, Starfleet Command. Transmission ends, sir."

Pike closed the channel unceremoniously, cutting Ogawa off before sitting back in his chair again, locking his gaze on Kirk.

"Sorry about how that came across—"

"I don't give a damn about any of that. What I *do* give a damn about and what makes no sense whatsoever is that they order you back to Farragut. *Then* they order you back to Earth? Then back to Farragut again—*and* promote you to captain?"

Kirk locked gazes with Pike, and both were silent for a moment. But Pike was right. While everything that had happened in the span of twenty-four hours was

well beyond strange, this rapid-fire barrage of contradicting orders and counter-orders was irregular. Was he supposed to go to *Farragut* or not? He felt in his gut he was, but—

He stepped forward and reached his index finger toward the intercom button on Pike's desk, then caught himself. "May I captain?" Pike made a small gesture to which Kirk pushed the intercom button. "Captain Kirk to Bridge?"

"Bridge. Ogawa."

"Those last orders from Starfleet? Were they encrypted?"

"Yes, captain. Code One, sir." Ogawa answered succinctly, following which Kirk's and Pike's gaze snapped to each other again. Before Kirk could respond, Pike's own finger reached in and shut off the intercom.

"That channel's specifically reserved for direct communications between the Admiralty and the captains of specific ships of the line," Kirk began. "The last time Code One was used was used was—"

"After your father, Chancellor Arkanon and President Alarius were killed," Pike finished for him, then both continued staring at each other. "Starfleet suspected a coup and used it to order certain ships to secure Earth. Enterprise was one of them."

Kirk began to break it down. "T'Pol *purposely* used Code One to contact you directly because she knew nobody else in Starfleet would even know she had."

"Which means what?" Pike countered.

"I'm supposed to go to Farragut."

"Why?" Pike stared at him with a look just short of annoyed

"Because she wants everyone else in Starfleet to think you're bringing me back on Enterprise."

"Again—why?"

"To buy time," Kirk lowered his voice. "Starfleet is unaware of Admiral T'Pol's orders for me to continue to Farragut. They're expecting me to be aboard Enter-

prise when it arrives back at Earth—which I won't be. And, since Code One orders are classified, you're obligated to keep them classified until the proper authority demands you to disclose them." Kirk summed up like a defense attorney. "I'll take off in a long-range shuttle."

"I'm not going to just dump you out in the middle of nowhere and go about my business. Much less lie about it. Besides, all deployments are separately and securely logged and reported real-time to Starfleet Operations, so the moment you take off, Starfleet will know."

Kirk fell silent. He knew he had to get to *Farragut*. The stakes were just too monumental—as were the forces arrayed against him. Suddenly his hair stood up as he realized he was at the center of everything that was happening.

Silence ensued as Pike's gaze fell on the solitary martini glass that he'd saved out of Doctor Boyce's personal effects—something he knew the good doctor would have wanted him to keep as a memento of their many 'happy hours', as they'd come to be called. He picked it up by the stem and twirled it between his thumb and forefinger, and gazed at Kirk's distorted image in the glass. Phil would have liked young Kirk. Pike could almost hear his old friend's voice telling him to trust young Kirk—and more importantly, to trust his own instincts—and those instincts said exactly that.

Kirk watched Pike set the glass back in its place with purpose. Then he reached across his desk to his comms panel and tapped a call button. "Pike to Engineering," he called.

"Engineering, Scott here, sir," came the familiar Scottish brogue after a few seconds. He sounded winded.

"Mister Scott, that old Romulan merchant craft we picked up full of escaped Federation refugees a couple months ago…"

"Aye, sir," the engineer answered. "She's all packed up and ready to be dropped off at Starbase 17 as soon as we get there, just like yeh ordered."

"Well unpack it. I want it space-ready in two hours. Pike out." Pike punched the comms button and met Kirk's curious gaze. "We loaned our long-range shuttles to the relief effort on Coridan."

CHAPTER 48

Naska Starport

"Vulcans created logic, humans created religion and Klingons created honor," his father often used to say, and though many years had passed since he had heard it, the words and the voice that spoke them were as clear as though he were standing next to him. "More killing has taken place in the name of logic and religion and honor than all wars combined."

His father, Kalor Arkanon, was a wise Klingon who lived in the wrong time—and he had been betrayed and murdered for it. He was torn when it came to his feelings for his father. He loved him, but pitied him for being so easily beguiled. "Earthers can not be trusted." Gast had taught him. Gast was not as enlightened as his father, but was wiser. It was a strange truth to know that Gast had now been a father to him longer than his own natural father had.

From the moment Gast revealed to him that George Kirk had deviously manipulated his father's trust and had personally smuggled the bomb aboard the Federation President's transport, Prath had known that his path in life would one day lead him to defeat the Federation and avenge his father, and the Empire.

Yet one of the most cherished of Klingon proverbs, words spoken by Kahless himself, was that an enemy is only an enemy in life, and that the bonds of friendship in eternity are forged by blood and steel and fire between victor and vanquished.

Fleet Commander Prath clenched his jaw, grinding his sharp yellow teeth together until they ached. His anger had grown in the years since his father's death. How could his father could share the bonds of friendship with George Kirk in the

afterlife. An Earther? A betrayer? A murderer? A coward? Fortunately he no longer had to try to make sense of that since Gast recently had told him that George Kirk yet lived somehow. That his friend Varian Cain had maintained a transporter lock on him in order to beam him off before the bomb exploded.

For so long he and everyone else believed George Kirk had been killed by his own bomb on the Federation President's transport. But George Kirk had fled the Gastillion summit along with the rebel Klingon traitors, and had for fifteen years, remained hidden.

Not for much longer. If George Kirk's fellow conspirator Varian Cain was somewhere on Cestus, he would find him or tear the planet apart in the process.

A glint of reflected sunlight burned into his eyes. Standing between the two pilots and looking out through the front canopy, his gaze fell on a vast range of snow-capped mountains that stretched endlessly across the distant horizon. Massive, sheer-faced monuments of stone rose high into the darkening azure sky, their surfaces bathed in the brilliant but rapidly fading rose-red blaze of the alien sun setting far behind his flotilla of troop transports, their glaciated blade-like peaks stabbing into the red and gold-streaked cirrus clouds.

The lead pilot pulled back on his control yoke, and as they ascended, gaining altitude to clear the jagged front range peaks, dozens more arose behind them, and still more behind those, for as far as the eye could see, ultimately fading into the cobalt darkness of the encroaching alpine night, beneath which a dark gray blanket of storm clouds had rolled over them like an ocean wave obscuring the valleys far below. The otherwise unspoiled vista might have been inspiring indeed, were it not for the hologram of Kor's exceedingly ugly, human-like face, blurry and semi-transparent, that floated in his headset's tiny flip-down screen in front of his left eye.

"Our teams have searched the wreckage sites of the Farragut but have found no survivors," Kor reported through the tiny headset speaker in his right ear. "What are your orders?"

"Blockade the entire planet," Prath shouted over the steady din of the engines. "Board and inspect everything, in or out. If they resist, destroy them." He

dropped his gaze to the floor window beside his left foot. Nestled into the darkness of a wide high-altitude plateau well above the snow-line, tiny pinpoints of lights had already begun to glitter in the twilight and were beginning to grow steadily closer as his pilot began their descent through the storm clouds. "We are deploying into Naska now," he concluded. And then he flipped the small screen back up out of his way before Kor could even acknowledge his orders.

Prath continued to watch as they steadily descended toward the glittering lights of Naska Starport, growing closer and closer to a task he felt quite sure he was going find intensely tedious. He hated occupations. He preferred a straightforward battle to the death to herding civilians like so much livestock. This wouldn't even qualify as a hollow victory. But he had trusted his mentor implicitly for all these many years, and he was right. This was a necessary step on the path to righteous vengeance. Soon George Kirk's traitorous friend, Varian Cain, would be his. Perhaps even tonight, somewhere beneath him.

Through the sudden swirling maelstrom of snow whipping past the canopy, the glowing lights of Naska Starport shimmered dimly from dozens of taller buildings that rose out of hundreds of shorter ones beneath them. Surrounded and walled in on all sides by near vertical mountain faces, the city appeared to be completely and perpetually cut off from the rest of the known universe.

The ride was rough with turbulence from the storm that like an angry beast making a kill, wrapped its arms around the mountains. Prath braced himself just inside the doorway as the craft suddenly pitched steeply forward and practically dove toward the snow-bound spaceport. The various landing strips and docking facilities—at least those that he could see—had all been plowed, but swirling gales of snow sweeping wave after wave across the tarmac threatened to bury them within minutes. Several were occupied by assorted vessels, large and small, of numerous origins. Some he recognized while others were new to his eyes, but all were slowly disappearing under the blinding snow, where they would remain until he found who he was looking for.

Corba, his youthful and exuberant adjutant, pushed up near the door behind him as the pilot brought the troop carrier down roughy, it's skids sinking into the

snow-packed tarmac. Without a moment's hesitation Prath stepped back, pushing Corba out of his way, and turned to the hatch, released it, and stepped out into the wintery gale and down onto the landing strip. The bracing icy smack of wind would be invigorating were it not for the monotonous chore that lay ahead. Occupations bored him. Dealing with locals and their ongoing petty meaningless lives made him want to break off his own arm and beat them all to death with it.

Seconds later Corba's heavy boots crunched into the snow beside him. He held a thick winter overcoat out to him. Prath stared at his underling for a moment as if planning to slay him for even thinking that he might need it, but the angry winds whipping around him carried with them a torrent of ice-hard snow that was beginning to sting his face, so he grabbed the bulky coat without a word and pulled it on over his heavy torso armor.

"What is that governor's name again?" he yelled to Corba through thick clouds of exhaled breath and over the howling wind and the screaming din of the several dozen other troop carriers that were landing nearby and deploying their troops and equipment.

"Brak!" Corba called back to him as officers yelling to disembarking troops added their commanding voices to the noise.

"Bark?" Prath parroted, albeit incorrectly as snow began to cling to his eyebrows and on his beard in thick icy spikes..

"Brak!" Corba corrected. But Prath had already lost interest and strode off toward a group of officers who were coordinating troop deployments. Corba pulled on his own thick overcoat and rushed off toward one of the larger equipment transports.

All wearing similar heavy coats like Prath's, the occupation forces now crowded the landing strip en masse as they formed up into their respective units, every last one of them geared up and outfitted for winter assault. Whirlwinds of ice and snow exploded under the rumbling blasts of the empty troop carriers' landing thrusters as they took off steeply to allow for more to land.

Prath squinted and blinked through thick layer of icy stalactites that had already coated his eyebrows as he stalked across the runway through the cyclone of snow, watching entire companies of warriors charge across the tarmac toward the buildings and other spaceport structures while several of the larger cargo carriers began rolling off the all-terrain transport vehicles. Troop commanders and their support staffs climbed into those vehicles and drove off in various directions while the infantry began moving through the nearest buildings, pushing the locals out of their way with ruthless force or dragging them aside and beating them senseless if they were stupid enough to resist. One team of warriors even dragged a few out of a building already dead and tossed them into the snow, which quickly darkened around them as their blood flowed freely from their lifeless bodies.

He turned his attention to an approaching ground vehicle—one of the Tellerite armored personnel carriers that his forces had been supplied with in order to more efficiently carry out this miserable operation—it's oversized all-weather tires kicking up clumps of hard-packed snow in their deep treads. He snarled with disdain at the vehicle. It was bad enough to have to waste time invading this miserable city of no strategic significance whatsoever—to capture Varian Cain, he reminded himself—but to be forced to do so in a piece of rolling Tellerite junk was utterly shameful. What had happened to the once mighty Klingon arms industry? Why were they, the fiercest warriors in the galaxy, now forced to serve the Empire in warships funded by the Romulan Senate and travel across occupied worlds in alien junk such as this? Pitiful.

The APC stopped in front of him. Corba quickly jumped out and hurried around to open the passenger-side door, and held it open while Prath lifted his bat'leth from beneath his heavy coat and threw it inside the vehicle. Most commanders serving at his level no longer carried a bat'leth into battle the way their ancestors had. Prath was proud not to count himself among them. And this particular bat'leth was special.

"Instruct the unit commanders to concentrate their searches in the entertainment district, in and around the drinking, gambling, and other high crime establishments," Prath ordered as he climbed into the passenger seat. "Pay particular attention to those that offer sexual entertainment."

"I do not understand, Lord," Corba freely admitted.

"Earthers have a predictable instinct contrary their own established systems of law and order," Prath explained with barely controlled patience as he started fiddling with the harness straps. "It is in their nature. In a crisis they will very quickly resort to criminal elements." Prath fell silent as his eyes fell upon a tall, slender, and effeminate humanoid man stalking purposefully toward him with a severe expression on his narrowly drawn face. His thin, weak frame was easily battered by the relentless winds of the snowstorm, as were the four similarly dressed humanoid minions flanking him on both sides.

"Are you Prath?" the Earther yelled angrily in a shrill, nasally voice so weak and powerless, much like his slightness of gait, that it was barely audible over the howling winds. Corba seemed oddly fascinated with him, forgot himself and stood there still holding the door open.

"While you stand there," Prath barked, snapping Corba's attention back to him while ignoring the Earther's insolent inquiry, "Cain is probably somewhere trying to charter a ship."

"'Lord!" Corba exclaimed, taking the not so subtle hint, standing straight and slapping his fist to his chest with a solid thud, despite the padding of his thick coat. Prath frowned and slammed his own door shut while Corba purposefully marched around to the driver's side. The shrill man appeared incensed at being ignored as he halted just outside the door and pulled his collar tighter around his neck, and pounded his fist against Prath's window.

Prath knew it was a mistake, but he pushed the button that lowered the window and turned to glare at the angry human, saying nothing.

"I *said*," the shrill man started again, raising his obnoxious nasally voice even louder, "are you the one responsible for…" He raised a hand and gestured toward the bulk of the occupation troops and equipment in one sweeping motion, "…this catastrophe?"

Prath stared silently and without expression into the shivering man's dark bulging eyes, noting how his complexion was growing steadily more scarlet in hue.

Whether that was due to the cold or to his anger, Prath didn't know. Nor did he care.

"I'm talking to you, Klingon!" the man shouted, spitting the race-name out of his mouth as though it were a curse.

"Are you the spaceport supervisor?" Prath calmly asked the choleric Earther.

"No, I'm not the spaceport supervisor, you idiot!" the man answered indignantly. "I'm the governor, and I demand an explanation for this…this travesty of interstellar law!"

"You are Bark?" Prath then asked, showing the slightest hint of interest in the man for the first time.

"Brak! Governor Brak," the human bellowed angrily.

"Well, Governor, I need to talk to the spaceport supervisor," Prath returned dismissively. "Get him for me."

"I will not!" Brak exploded.

It was all Prath could do to restrain his impulse to reach out through the window and simply crush the man's throat just to silence the annoying sound that came from it. "Then I will tell you. I am closing down your spaceport and your city until further notice. Nobody will be allowed on or off this planet."

"You can't do that!" Brak roared, incensed.

Prath glanced around at his overwhelming forces, still deploying with little to no resistance whatsoever, then looked back at the human. "I am looking for a Federation criminal by the name of Varian Cain. He is an enemy of the empire."

"And just what would an enemy of your empire be doing in my city? What would he be doing on this planet for that matter?"

"This I cannot answer, Governor. Why anybody would want to come to this miserable place baffles me." Prath lowered his voice and glared menacingly into Brak's eyes. "But I assure you, Governor, I will find him--or I will kill everybody in the process--starting with you."

The governor stared at Prath in silence, unable to speak or respond in any way.

With a wave from his commander, Corba drove off, leaving Brak and his minions standing in the swirling snow.

CHAPTER 49

Enterprise

Kirk followed Captain Pike into the ship's hanger bay, carrying his old copy of *A Tale of Two Cities* tucked beneath his arm. He'd changed into some nondescript gray and black clothing that one of the refugees had been wearing when the *Enterprise* picked them up—a somewhat utilitarian outfit typical of those worn by Romulan merchants, according to the ship's quartermaster, who'd based her explanation on that given to her by the refugee himself. Something between cotton and wool, probably replicated, the unusual material felt odd against his skin. Not itchy exactly, just odd.

They headed aft toward the right side of the hanger bay doors where a genuinely ugly and rather decrepit looking old weather-worn faded olive-gray craft not much larger than a standard Starfleet shuttlecraft stood atop four stubby landing struts, looking as though it were just waiting to be scrapped for parts. As they approached it, Kirk shifted his book from beneath his right arm to his left, then ran his palm along the leading edge of the hull. It was coarse—heavily pitted from all the grime, grit, micrometeorites and whatever else that it had encountered over its lifespan. It had clearly seen better days and was probably the oldest vessel or vehicle he'd been this close to since he took his father's priceless three-hundred-year-old Corvette for a joyride so many years ago. At least the car had been in good condition. The scout craft looked like a deathtrap.

"Wha?" Montgomery Scott's familiar voice bellowed from behind as though the answer might be of vital importance.

Kirk turned around just in time to see him jump down from the hatch, small multi-function tool in hand, wearing a quizzical expression on his face.

"Did yeh hear somethin'?" he asked, then stepped past him before he could answer and walked around to the front of the old heap, head down and eyes bouncing back and forth as he scanned the hanger deck floor. "Well I dunna wha.'" He searched the deck for a few more moments, then finally gave up with a loud sigh. "God bless anyone travelin' in this heap."

"That would be me," Kirk enlightened him.

Scotty turned and looked at him with chagrin and pity and a shake of his head. Then his eyes fell on the book in Kirk's hand. "Well then I hope that's the owner's manual because you're gonna need it."

"That bad?" Kirk came back, grinning at what he hoped was sarcasm.

"How's she look, Mister Scott?" Pike's voice broke in from nearby.

"The storage container I had her packed in is more spaceworthy." Scotty shrugged, "But I installed a portable subspace transceiver like yeh asked, sir—which I might add is the most valuable piece of equipment on the bloody thing now." he shifted his gaze to Kirk, "And which *you'll* be needin' to call for help."

"Will it get him where he needs to go?" Pike shut down Scotty's confidence-inspiring banter.

"Aye, sir." He turned back to Kirk. "If yeh're sweet to her and keep your hands off her nacelles, she'll get yeh where yeh need to go—speakin' of which, I'd better have one more look at that outboard array." Scotty strode between them and disappeared around the other side of the spacecraft.

"Ha! I knew I heard somethin' fall!" his voice bellowed from behind the junk heap.

Pike looked like he was about to say something to Kirk when a loud crash and the crescendo of several dozen objects large and small hitting the deck suddenly echoed through the hanger bay. "I'm all right," Scotty shouted from somewhere on the other side of the vessel. Then he broke into a rant that would have made

the meanest drill instructor proud. "Are yeh daft? Don't be leavin' things all around! Are yeh tryin' to kill me then?"

"He always makes things sound worse than they actually are because it makes him seem like a miracle-worker when he saves the day—which oddly enough—he always seems to do."

"Good to know," Kirk said, letting a relaxed smile crease his face once more. Then he caught sight of someone beyond Pike's shoulder approaching them. It was Spock, dressed in clothing very similar to his own. The Vulcan's arrival there in those clothes could only mean one thing, and that one thing didn't make any sense. A look of confusion quickly swept the lingering smile from Kirk's face.

"That's right. He's going with you," Pike told him with a tone of finality, noting his expression and knowing its cause without having to turn around and look.

"It's really not necessary."

"This is a Romulan vessel," Spock pointed out as he joined the two captains by the scout craft, "and as I am fluent in all dialects of Romulan, my presence will greatly increase our odds of success."

"Not up for debate, Kirk," Pike cut in. He glanced briefly at the spacecraft and then looked once more to both of them. "Well, I have a ship to run." He caught Kirk's eye once more as he started to turn away and said, "And I want him back in the same condition he left in."

Spock's right eyebrow rose halfway up his forehead. "All right. Get off my ship." Pike turned and strode off, leaving Kirk warily eyeing Spock.

CHAPTER 50

Harry Mudd

The oppressive, dry heat, dust and relentless sunlight was just a fond memory. Now the air was icy, with blinding snow that howled and swirled angrily through the windshield. Night had fallen an hour ago, and because they couldn't risk turning on their headlights, the ride up the mountainside had been slow going. Almost an hour of relentless squinting and frequent leaning to look out through his opened window into the freezing air had left Mitchell's head throbbing sharply behind his eye sockets. The sharp pain on the back of his stiff neck radiated across his shoulders and down to the middle of his shoulder blades.

They hadn't seen any patrols or drones circling, but then again the Klingons probably assumed like anyone else with any sense, that no-one in their right mind would ever want to venture anywhere outside the city in any direction other than up.

In the silence of concentration, his thoughts had also been on the many faces he'd encountered since his arrival on *Farragut*. Faces he'd never see again. He knew very few of them personally. Faces. That's exactly what they were. People whose gaze he'd met while walking down a corridor, or with whom he'd exchanged a brief word or two in the elevator. He could only hope it went quickly for them.

Just a block into the city they came upon a small detachment of bored Klingon soldiers who were likely upset by their lowly assigned task to guard the city's only outbound roadway, and they were rightly surprised to encounter anyone coming inbound. They got the standard Klingon treatment—questions punctuated by threats of certain death. But it quickly became evident that they weren't there simply to occupy the city. They were looking for someone in particular—*Farragut* survi-

vors or perhaps the mysteriously missing personnel from the desert outpost. Whoever it was, hopefully it wasn't them and it wasn't Jim. Meanwhile, the Klingons eventually grew bored tormenting them and let them continue on.

As soon as they were out of sight, Mitchell decided that it would be safer for them to just ditch the vehicle somewhere and continue on foot, rather than risk another checkpoint. They abandoned the vehicle in a dark alley filled with snow drifts and proceeded along the dimly lit and unplowed side-streets, jigging and jagging several times until they came upon a patrol and another checkpoint. Thankfully the near blizzard conditions gave them some cover.

He drew his bare hands out of his warm, deep parka pockets and yanked down on the chords hanging from either side of his fur-lined hood, drawing it tighter as tiny needles of icy snow stung his face, then quickly plunged his hands back into his pockets. As the wind-whipped snow began clinging to his hood's furry rim, he was thankful that he'd had the foresight to bring the parkas along.

He glanced over at Ross walking close beside him, her slim frame bundled up tight like he was with just a hint of her big eyes and pouty lips discernible in the shadows of her snow-covered hood liner. With sweat running down her forehead and into her eyes in the stifling heat of the garage back at Cestus Base, it must have seemed odd to her when he brought the parkas out of the building with him, but whatever questions she might have had at the time had obviously been answered.

Neither of them said much as they walked quickly for block after block. Possibly because the wail of the wind made it hard for them to hear each other, but Mitchell suspected it some was due to the ongoing grief he'd been giving her. He was beginning to feel increasingly guilty about that, and it made him mad that he even cared. Certainly she'd been just as much affected by the loss of Farragut—probably more since she'd been there longer. Who knew?

A large, soft, almost furry snowflake blew in and stuck to his eyelashes, blurring his vision as it began to melt. Breaking the news to Jim about the loss of the Farragut wasn't going to be easy. He recalled the day he first arrived and stepped out onto the hanger deck. The bodies were so numerous that a section of the flight

deck normally piled high with cargo containers had been cleared and cordoned off for use as a makeshift morgue. Typically those who die on a starship were stored in the transporter buffer until they could be returned home to family, but they casualties so numerous, this was simply impractical. He could still see the two-hundred or so body-bags neatly arranged side-by-side behind Jim, whose grim face had said all there was to say. He wasn't the same man, and the few months that had passed since he had seen him had appeared to have aged him a decade.

A particularly strong gust of icy wind slapped him back to reality. The nearer they drew to 'the strip' as the locals called it, the heavier the concentration of enemy forces seemed to become, to the point where Mitchell had to resign himself to the fact that no matter what route they followed, there was simply no way that he and Ross were going to make it to the casino unnoticed. Fortunately—and strangely—the clothes they'd borrowed bore no Starfleet insignia of any kind—he'd checked.

"Now would be a really good time to invade Qo'nos," he joked just loud enough for Ross to hear, feeling that his lips had stiffened from the cold as he spoke. As much as she annoyed him sometimes, the silence between them was starting to make him uncomfortable.

"Why do you say that?" Ross asked, her muffled voice barely reaching beyond the recesses of her hood behind the cloudy puff of her breath.

"Because I think all the Klingons are here."

She didn't reply or react in any way, and Mitchell realized that his attempts at levity were wasted on her, as usual. He turned his head far enough to look past his hood at her with contempt, just as she turned hers to look at him.

"Do you really think Commander Kirk will get into the city?" she asked, loud enough for him to hear easily, but still in her typically analytical tone. He could have sworn the cold had swollen her lips into an even more attractive pout, and then he did swear, though only in his mind, at himself for having noticed.

"*We* made it," he countered, then added, "I don't know, Ross…but hey, maybe if you ask a little louder, one of the Klingons can answer your question."

A cloud of breath billowed out of her hood, momentarily obscuring his view of those big, doe-like eyes that he'd begrudgingly started to adore. "Why do you always do that?" she asked.

"What?" Mitchell shot back, looking away as he slipped on a sheet of ice barely catching his balance before he fell. Winter boots would have been a good idea, too. His toes were starting to feel like frozen carrots in his shoes.

"Never mind," she said. Then she fell silent again.

A few seconds passed, and then she turned and looked back at him.

"What?" he practically shouted.

"I know you don't like me very much."

"What the hell is with you? We're freezing our asses off out here in the middle of a Klingon occupation and you're worried whether or not I like you?"

"I am not *worried*," she replied matter-of-factly. "It's just an observation."

He chuckled and shook his head dismissively. Then he suddenly realized that he was being mean to her again, and what's more, that he couldn't seem to stop being mean to her once the momentum kicked in.

"And I'm not a Vulcan, you know," she said. "I know how I come across to people, but I do have feelings," she explained in her typical monotone way, which this time seemed especially ironic. Was she fishing for an apology?

"You and Penelope were really roommates?" he asked her, the idea that Ross had seen him without any clothes on still vexed him greatly.

"She liked you…a lot," Ross offered.

"Penelope? Yeah, she liked me so much she dumped me." There it was again. He really was a sarcastic bastard when someone put him on the defensive. "Oh shit!" he exclaimed as he suddenly stopped in his tracks, throwing his arm out to stop Ross as well, catching her right across her mid-section before pushing her into

the shadows with his own body. Somehow they ended up face to face, and he could feel her warm clouded breath on his lips as he glared over her shoulder.

"What is it?" Ross barely got out before Mitchell nearly slapped his hand across her mouth to silence her. With a look just shy of being annoyed, she reached up and pushed his hand aside and turned her head to the left to see where he was staring so intently.

A Klingon APC was parked in the middle of one of the intersections along 'the strip' and more soldiers were stopping and inspecting vehicles at another checkpoint. Mitchell sighed as he dropped his arm and slipped his hand back into his pocket. Three layers of stationary perimeter security checkpoints plus rolling checkpoints. Whoever they were looking for, they really, really wanted to find badly. Perhaps they were searching for the missing base personnel. Maybe Jim or even for them. Even if they got to the casino, they'd have to blend into the background.

He turned Ross by the shoulders and pushed her ahead of him down an alley, heading for the next block over. Less than a minute later they turned the corner onto the avenue and found themselves staring at a large floating holographic sign cycling through assorted languages and fonts, including a simple blinking pattern that was accompanied by musical tones, that all said he same thing—Orion's Belt. Snowflakes shimmered as the icy wind blew and swirled them through the luminescent hologram.

The huge casino looked much as Mitchell remembered—gaudy—like an ancient Arabian sheik's palace crossed with a Christmas tree. The vintage thirteen-floor building was shorter and obviously much older than the taller ones that surrounded it on all sides, all of which were equally as garish, with oversized holographic signs blinking and animating in various ways all up and down the main thoroughfare for as far as the eye could see. Three pairs of three-meter-tall, gold-trimmed crystal double-doors served as the main entrance and exit—the neon-like holographic sign hovered high over the center pair—and were flanked by half a dozen oversized, gold-trimmed, smoked-crystal arch windows on both sides, evenly spaced between the edges of the doors and the building's rounded corners.

Intensely bright and colorful flashing holographic neon-themed lights outlined and highlighted every one of them, trimming every contour of the building from the base of its low, wide steps to the points of its golden spires.

And like in every other section of the city they had wandered through, Klingon soldiers were patrolling the streets. It began to dawn on him that the scale of the occupation was considerable, and that his earlier joke to Ross might not be a joke at all.

Mitchell let go of Ross' arm and pressing his hand into her midsection this time, nudged her into the narrow shadows of a small store's entrance alcove. He joined her there and pressed close against her to make sure that he was as well hidden as she was while still being able to peek around the wall and see the casino.

"The Orion's Belt?" she asked aloud, gazing up at Mitchell as he studied both the casino and the Klingon soldiers gathered between it and them.

Once again he felt her warm breath against the side of his face as its translucent cloud momentarily condensed before it vanished into the air. He'd never admit it to her, but he was actually enjoying the moment—enjoying pressing himself against her.

"Commander?"

Mitchell met her gaze. Her eyes really were beautiful, and those pouty lips… What was he thinking? "What?" he asked.

Her lips parted as if she were going to say something, then she paused.

"Nothing."

Mitchell frowned at her, perplexed momentarily before dismissing the entire moment.

"Come on. There's an entrance on the other side."

They headed up the avenue, purposefully, but not too quickly. Not five minutes later they turned the far corner and there it was, a smaller red-carpeted entrance, above which a smaller but similarly animated holographic sign flashed and flowed with ever-changing colors to attract the public's attention. A fairly expensive look-

ing limousine hovered quietly nearby, backed just inside an alleyway much like the one he and Ross had cut through. Probably a high-roller, Mitchell thought.

They made their way up the burgundy carpet, stomping the snow off of their shoes as they went. As they neared the entrance, a pair of transparent sliding doors began to open for them automatically, allowing a burst of warm air to billow out and embrace them.

Once inside the brightly lit and thankfully much warmer rear lobby, they slid their hoods off their heads, unzipped their parkas, and gazed down a short flight of stairs that led to the casino proper, which with its array of hundreds of various electronic slot machines and gaming tables could easily have passed for a twenty-first century Las Vegas casino, were it not for the jumble of pulsing and blinking multicolor holograms rotating their displays through various languages so that the myriad life forms from all corners of the known galaxy could understand them. Surprisingly agile spherical hovering remote servers zipped above, around and between them delivering drinks on attached trays.

Mitchell led the way down what at least looked like marble steps to the carpeted casino floor. It was just as he remembered it—dazzlingly lit and devoid of deep shadows, crowded. In contrast to the rather impersonal remote servers, several scantily clad—very scantily clad—green-skinned, black-haired Orion slave men and women also moved about serving food and drinks to those customers who preferred more…personable service, no doubt making a few business deals of their own. Mitchell had once joked with Jim that most of them had more hair than clothes.

It definitely was more crowded than he remembered it ever having been. It was evident the Klingons had closed down the spaceport and nobody was being allowed to leave. Harry must be giddy with glee, reaping a windfall from his captive crowd of suckers. At one gaming table in particular, a group of six or seven off-duty Klingons were howling and growling and generally carrying on as if they owned the place—which for the time being at least, they pretty much did. Obviously drunk on whatever it was they were drinking, they didn't appear to be paying

much attention to what was going on around them—a good sign for he and Ross, and a bad sign for anyone who got in their way.

It didn't take long for Mitchell to spot his target.

Harry—a tall, slender human in his early thirties with light skin and longish, thick, overly coiffed brown hair. Very well dressed in an expensively tailored salmon suit and bowtie—salmon? And a bowtie? Really?—Harry was standing attentively by a center-lit table in the middle of a raised portion of the casino floor that had it's own private bar and bartender and was roped off from the rest of the casino by what were no doubt some of the finest gold-accented royal-red velvet ropes money could buy—the V.I.P. poker table. Shamelessly ingratiating himself to an even more well-dressed, rather rotund humanoid, who was obviously being protected by the two burly beings standing behind him, he was nonetheless keeping an eye on the rest of the floor as well, raising his eyes every few seconds and glancing around. Two others were seated at the table across from the man in white, but Mitchell couldn't see them very well.

Having sufficiently sized up the situation, Mitchell nudged Ross and leaned in toward her ear as he cautiously pointed in another direction toward a large and very ornate padded door. "See that door?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"I want you to go wait for me by it."

"Why—?" Her words fell on Mitchell's back as he walked off.

Pushing through the beehive of activity, he drew closer and got his first real good look at the entire group in the V.I.P. section. Most impressive among them was the large—okay the fat man with the bodyguards. Dressed in an unseasonable white dinner jacket, white shirt, and black bow-tie, he had an air of class and sophistication about him that obviously outweighed any trace of strength he might have had to push himself away from the dinner table. The first of his two bodyguards wasn't nearly as burly as Mitchell had first thought. Rather, he—it—was a tall, wiry insect-like creature that looked like the results of a transporter accident that had combined a human body with a large housefly's head. It was dressed in

an ill-fitting suit and wore very narrow and dark sunglasses over its large bulbous eyes. The second bodyguard was as tall as the first, but more solid looking, and was also wearing a suit and sunglasses.

The two characters seated opposite the fat man looked like they had just stepped out of a twentieth-century mobster movie. One was a balding and rather dim looking out of shape human wearing a wrinkled suit that had to have come from one of the gaudiest fashion lines ever designed in any era—or from a museum. Evidently the trusted sidekick in the partnership, his more conservatively dressed companion was a very thin man with dark hair and piercing eyes tinged with anger and contempt who reminded him of Count Dracula. In the middle of what appeared to be some variation on poker, the pot in the middle of the table was fairly small and all three players had a more or less equal pile of chips in front of them, so they most likely hadn't been playing for very long.

The fact that all three were still alive might have been another clue in most other Naska casinos—probably would have—but the Orion's Belt Casino was known for being much classier than that. That was why he liked it so much. That and because Harry often let him win at Roulette.

Harry stopped talking suddenly as his eyes locked with Mitchell's. The faux smile he'd been wearing fled his face quickly and he flushed even paler white. Hastily excusing himself from the table, he started walking quickly toward him. A casino employee—likely a security officer of some sort—unclipped the velvet rope for him, just in time.

Harry intercepted Mitchell and threw him an overdone smile. "Mitch!" he exclaimed in a friendly but hushed tone as he threw out his hand to greet him, while at the same time putting his other hand on Mitchell's shoulder in an attempt to turn him in the other direction. Mitchell went along with it, returning Harry's fake smile with an equally manufactured one of his own as the two clasped hands.

"I had no idea you were coming!" Harry said as he sized up his less than fashionably attired old friend.

"Nice threads," Mitchell commented insincerely.

"Sorry I can't say the same for you," Harry said as he gave Mitchell the once-over. "How was the Russian front?" Then he leaned in close and whispered, "What are you doing here, Mitch?"

"Why don't we talk about it in your office?" Mitchell told rather than actually asked, crushing Harry's hand quite hard in his grip.

"Whoa!" The grin swept from Harry's face quickly returned with vigor as he forced a laugh. "Quite a grip you got there buddy boy."

"And you're about to feel it around your neck," Mitchell threatened, his smile vanishing as he dropped all pretense of friendliness, causing Harry's own smile to lose some of its vigor as well.

"That's harsh," Harry complained. "Hey, how about a drink?" He tried to wrench his hand from Mitchell's monster grip, but wasn't successful.

"Your office. Let's go..." Mitchell repeated, giving him a smile and a warning with the same expression. "Now."

"Sure. Okay. Fine." Harry had grown genuinely nervous but did his best to maintain his jovial nature as Mitchell more or less manhandled him toward the other side of the room, where Ross was waiting near the door with a perplexed expression on her face, watching them draw closer.

"Wait, you're not still mad about that thing that time, are you?"

"Depends on which thing and which time," Mitchell shot back, not really interested at all in anything Harry had to say as he ushered him across the casino floor.

"Which one were you talking about?" Harry fished, slightly worried as Mitchell gave him an extra firm squeeze on his shoulder for good measure."Ow! Okay, I'm walking, I'm walking," he protested, raising his voice.

Mitchell noticed that two casino security guards had just taken an interest in him, no doubt as a result of Harry's increased volume. "Wave them off," he rasped under his breath as he smiled at them.

Harry raised his hand and waved at them and they stopped and kept their distance. Then he noticed Ross standing there quietly and knew immediately from

the way she was glaring at Mitchell that they were together. "She with you?" he asked.

"Inside." Mitchell pushed Harry firmly up against the ornate door. Harry hesitated for a moment, but under Mitchell's warning glare he relented and opened the door. Mitchell gave him a firm push and then followed him inside.

As soon as he was through the doorway, Mitchell flipped on the lights and then grabbed a handful of Harry's shirt and walked him backwards, shoving him hard against the wall. Ross closed the door behind them and the cacophony of noises coming off the casino floor was instantly muffled to near silence.

"Hey!" Harry protested with fear in his eyes as Mitchell twisted the front of his shirt.

"It was a fake, wasn't it, Harry?" Mitchell angrily accused, not a trace of doubt in his tone.

"Oh! You're still mad about that?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised, chuckling nervously in disbelief. "You know fake has many interpretations—" Mitchell shoved him even harder against the wall. "Okay! Okay! It was a fake. But I didn't know! I swear! That guy told me it was the real thing! I got screwed just as much as you did."

"I doubt that!" Mitchell bellowed. "You're so full of shit, Harry, I swear I'd just kill you right now if I didn't need your help!"

Harry was still processing visions of his immanent death when confusion swept across his face, replacing the fear that had taken hold. "I…huh?"

"You heard me." Mitchell leaned in closer to Harry's face as some of the fear reappeared. He could smell the ever-present mint on his breath. Harry was always popping mints of some sort or another—one of his many annoying nervous habits. Wintergreen.

"I just wanted to hear you say it again." Harry risked a nervous smile.

Mitchell added a few more degrees of twist to Harry's shirt. "Lose that stupid-ass grin or so help me..."

"Fine! Fine! What do you need? I'll set it up!" Harry stopped short and had an epiphany. "You want your money back. You got it. I'm doing pretty well right now as you can see. I'll even throw in a free trip to the casino tailor…" Harry glanced at Ross. "…for both of you."

"I don't want your goddamn money, Harry!"

"Why not?" Apparently this only confused Harry further, and made him even more nervous that he already was. His eyes darted to Ross, who had been standing silently by, watching the entire argument. "She always talk so much?"

"Harry!"

"What? What? Tell me what you want!"

"Transportation."

"Why didn't you just say so? Take my car! It's out front—brand new! It's yours!"

"I don't want your stupid car!"

"Why? It's better than anything you'll ever have—"

"Just shut up and listen to me!" Mitchell shouted angrily, pulling up on Harry's shirt and twisting it some more. "We need transportation off this planet!"

"Oh?" Harry asked, his voice filled with relief and sarcasm at the same time, then he smirked. "I'll put it on my list right after when hell freezes over—"

That was it. Mitchell let go of Harry's shirt and grabbed him by the throat, shoving him hard against the wall again, then he jammed the muzzle of his phaser hard into his cheek.

"Hey!" Harry yelped with genuine pain this time.

"I don't have time for your crap, Harry!" Mitchell warned. "I really don't! Not now! Not this time! I need you to do whatever it takes to get us off this planet."

"Curious—when you say 'us'—who exactly are you talking about—?" Harry stuttered.

"Harry!"

"Small detail?" Harry pointed out, his tone of voice asking permission to specify. He took Mitchell's silent stare as the go-ahead. "In case you hadn't noticed, this is a casino, not a spaceport." Mitchell moved the phaser from the frightened man's temple back to his cheek. "Okay, this is getting redundant."

"You know what? The hell with it. I should just burn you down right now," Mitchell said, making it sound like he was simply thinking out loud. "Ross, step outside and make sure no one comes in here."

"Hey, okay!" Harry shouted, his anger and fear joining forces in a unified show of sudden boldness. "What are we here, anyway, method actors? Let me think for a minute—"

"No!" Mitchell barked. "No thinking! Only doing! Your ship. Don't play stupid because I know you got one."

"For God's sake, Mitch!" Harry pleaded. "Look around. Are you blind? The Klingons have shut down the entire city. Nobody's getting in or out."

"Nobody but us. Come on Harry. This kind of thing hasn't stopped you before," Mitchell reminded him.

"True—but these are Klingons," Harry pointed out. "They don't just arrest you and lock you up. They…well, you know the kinds of things they do. They kill you…and that's only if they're feeling generous."

"It was worse than this on Lasarias Five—a lot worse." Mitchell's voice seemed to soften a hint.

"Oh, uh…" Harry chuckled with sudden recollection, his face lighting up with a proud smile. "you remember that, eh?"

"Yeah, Harry, I remember that. As a matter of fact, I remember a lot of things—vividly. I'd sure hate to be captured by the Klingons and have my mind scanned. No telling what I might remember from the good old days."

"Fine. You made your point, okay?" Harry's voice dropped to a despondent murmur. "Not exactly subtle."

Mitchell lowered his phaser and removed his hand from Harry's throat. Harry reached up and straightened his bowtie, and then made a show of smoothing out his shirt. "This is from Paris, you know," he complained, "not that you'd know anything about that."

"Let's have it, Harry," Mitchell told him, as much to advise him of the futility of lying as to simply remind him of the fact. "You always have one eye on the back door. What's your bailout plan? How did you intend to skip out when the shit hit the fan this time?"

Harry made a show of thinking very hard, as if perhaps he wanted Mitchell to think that he hadn't given much thought to the possibility. Then a hesitant but knowing smile crept across his face.

"Why are you smiling?" Mitchell asked, eying him suspiciously.

"I found it, Mitch," Harry told him. And then he winked—actually winked at him as though they were lifelong friends.

"Found what?" Mitchell had no clue what the idiot was talking about and was about to say as much when it suddenly hit him. He knew exactly what Harry was talking about.

"That's right, Mitch," Harry confirmed, grinning even wider.

"Bullshit."

"Found what?" Ross chimed in curiously.

"Don't even—" Mitchell declared, staring Harry in the eye and ignoring Ross.

"No, I'm serious, Mitch," Harry insisted, his voice almost squealing with excitement. "I finally tracked it down. How many years have I been looking for it? Have we been looking for it?"

"There's no we looking for it. There's only you and you didn't find anything."

"Find what?" Ross tried once again. For all the attention the men paid her, she might as well have been invisible.

"Harry I swear to God—" Mitchell all but dismissed Harry and his stupid proud grin. "The damn thing doesn't exist."

"No, it does. I've seen it, Mitch. *I've actually seen it*."

"Seen what?" Ross asked, raising her voice in what for her was an explosion of impatience.

"Nothing," Mitchell snapped at her as he took a step back, then ignored her completely. "Because—there's nothing to see. It doesn't exist. It's a myth."

"Oh it exists, I assure you, Mitch. It exists and I have it." Harry held his gaze, surprisingly and confidently intractable, even for Harry.

"You're not smart enough to have found it all by yourself!" Mitchell bellowed, then reflected a moment before continuing. "You stole it. Who'd you steal it from Harry? Never mind. You didn't because you don't have it because it doesn't exist!"

"It does exist and I have it—and I didn't steal anything from anybody!" Harry proclaimed defensively, his chin raised and his voice inflated with self-righteous indignation. "I was paid to find it, which I did—and to broker the sale to a third party. I just haven't told them that I've found it yet. Momma may have raised hell but she didn't raise an idiot."

"Haven't told who?"

"Someone." Harry paused a moment, then gave him a knowing look of concern. "The Spaniard."

"The Spaniard?" A look of knowing fear appeared on Mitchell's face. "The Spaniard! He's here? Now? Are you insane? He wants to kill me!"

"Actually no—he wanted to cut off your—whatever. That's what he told me anyway."

Ross quietly studied Mitchell's sudden and surprising emotional transition from anger to paranoid fear at the mention of 'the Spaniard,' but she was even more intrigued by whatever mysterious item they were both talking about.

"Does she know I'm here?" Mitchell asked quietly, almost to the point of sounding uncharacteristically timid.

"I didn't even know you were here…something I shall rue greatly," Harry pointed out, his voice ringing with resignation.

Mitchell shook his head with certainty. "You stole it."

"I didn't steal it!" Harry bellowed. "I actually managed to track it down all by myself! Is that really so hard to believe?"

"Yes!" Mitchell quickly followed, then shifted, "No—talk to me about your ship, Harry. Let's talk about your ship—" Mitchell paused a moment and a strange look came over his face. "I want to see it."

"See my ship?" Harry asked after a moment, confused.

"No—you know what I'm talking about."

"I do? What?"

"What?" Ross echoed, prompting Harry to turn on her.

"What? What? What?" he mocked. "What are you? A parrot?"

"You say you have it? I want to see it." Mitchell pressed him back, once again staring at him expectantly. "See? That's what I thought."

"I don't have it here!" Harry retorted, but Mitchell obviously didn't believe him. "I don't! You think I'd be stupid enough to actually keep the God damned thing here?" He suddenly glanced skyward, wearing an expression of guilt that mimicked religious penance, then looked back at Mitchell again, who simply glared at him.

"Where is it then?" Mitchell finally asked.

"It's safe."

"Where!"

"On my ship!" Harry admitted circling back in conversation. "There. We're talking about my ship. Satisfied?" But then his indignation suddenly shifted back

to gleeful excitement again. “Mitch, I’m going to unload that thing tonight…for more money than you or I can possibly imagine!” As an apparent afterthought he added, “Of course I was going to track you down and give you your share—I just didn’t know where you were. But see how it all worked out? Here you are.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” Mitchell muttered, his tone soaked with sarcasm.

“I know, right? Can you believe it? After all these years, Mitch,” Harry continued unabated, “We’re finally going to make the big score—the one we’ve talked about for so long.”

“Come on. Let’s go.” Mitchell grabbed Harry firmly by the arm and started toward the door.

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Where?”

“Your ship.”

“No!” Harry wrenched his arm free in his boldest display of defiance yet—something that even surprised Mitchell. “I’m not leaving!” Harry stood his ground. “I’m not. You can kill me, but I’m not going—or you can help me.”

“I don’t want to help you!” Mitchell yelled, raising his phaser once more.

“Oh. We’re back to that? Fine. You know what? Kill me,” Harry dared him. “Shoot me. You’ll never find my ship in a thousand years.” He folded his arms across his slender chest, stood straight, and squeezed his eyes closed. “Go on. Get it over with. I’m ready. Make it quick.”

Ross raised her eyebrows, while Mitchell realized that he no longer had shock and awe working in his favor. He’d counted on Harry’s fear, but Harry was suddenly acting more intractable and fearless than ever, and seemed resigned to whatever fate awaited him. He’d gone all-in and Mitchell had nothing.

“God damn it!” Frustrated, he tucked his phaser back up under his parka and stomped away in a tirade of frustration, pacing around the room in a tight circle

of fury, absolutely livid as he descended into an angry muttering of unintelligible words that Harry slowly opened his eyes to watch until it finally died down after a minute or so.

"Does this mean you're ready to be reasonable now?—or maybe you want to slap me around some more?" Harry let his own sarcasm out. Then, coming to the end of his own patience, he added, "For God's sake, Mitch. You act like I'm screwing you here. You want my help? This is me helping."

"Oh right!" Mitchell exclaimed. "You helping me always translates into me helping you—and then comes the running and shooting."

"You're really a glass half-empty kind of a guy aren't you? I'd forgotten that about you." Harry turned to Ross. "You'd really be better off with someone else."

"Would I really?" Ross asked sincerely, misunderstanding what Harry had meant.

"Just—tell me what the hell I have to do," Mitchell demanded. "Go ahead. I'm going to regret it and wish I'd just killed you when I had the chance—but go ahead."

"Meet with him," Harry said matter-of-factly, as if it should have been obvious. "Just pretend to work for the Spaniard and meet with him. Close the sale."

"And just how the hell's that going to work?" Mitchell shot back.

"He's never met the Spaniard," Harry explained. "He's never met you either. Look, all you gotta do is sit down with this guy, play some poker—"

"Say what?"

"Play some poker," Harry said with as little emphasis as possible, perhaps hoping Mitchell hadn't heard him. The glare he got from him told him otherwise. "I told you, the guy likes to play poker. When he's in town I set up a private table."

"You did not tell me that."

"I did—while you were busy threatening to kill me!" He exclaimed defensively, "Or whatever—don't play cards—I really don't care. Just get him to agree to the

exchange. Once that's done, we go get the dingus from my ship—get the hell off this planet. Everybody's happy."

"Oh, so now all of a sudden getting off this planet isn't so hard after all?" Mitchell said, glaring at him. "And why do you even need my help? You didn't know I was here. What was your original plan?"

"One that wasn't as good as this one," Harry said, then smiled. "Besides, why should I do all the work? You want your cut, you gotta put in some effort." Harry scrutinized Mitchell's face for a few moments. "Come on, Mitch. For old times." Harry smiled.

"Shut up," Mitchell started. Then he relented once again, accepting his fate, completely out of character, again surprising Ross. "Whatever."

Harry smiled broadly. "I'll take that as a yes." And with that he started for the door.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Mitchell asked, stepping in front of him and blocking his way.

"To get you something to wear."

Mitchell looked himself over. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

"Where do you want me to start?" Harry shook his head and rolled his eyes as he started to move around Mitchell. "I'll be right back."

"Wait." Mitchell stepped in front of him again.

"What now?"

"There may be someone else going with us."

"There's more of you?" Harry's voice rose in sudden trepidation.

"Just one. You've met him before. Jim Kirk. He's meeting us here."

"Him?" Harry asked, almost choking. "I take it all back. Just kill me now." Then he reached for the door handle, but Mitchell was right there to put his hand on the door and stop him from opening it.

"Just remember, I'm going to be in here doing a whole lot of reminiscing about the good old days," Mitchell added to his warning. "I want them nice and fresh in my mind for the Klingons and their mind scanner. Am I coming through loud and clear?"

"Vague—not one of your stronger qualities." And with that, Harry opened the door and slipped out, letting a brief cacophony of casino noise in before he closed it behind him, flooding the room with near silence once more.

Mitchell glared at the closed door for a few moments, then relaxed and pulled off his parka and tossed it onto the couch. Then he walked around behind the desk and fell into an oversized cushy chair as Ross looked on with a concerned expression on her face.

"How long have you known him?" she asked.

"Too long," Mitchell replied with a sigh.

"Do you trust him?"

"Yeah, right."

"Why do they call him 'the Spaniard?'"

"Well not because he's Spanish." Mitchell leaned back in the chair and put his feet up on the desk. "So I'm just going to close my eyes here for a little bit, okay? Why don't you go out there and keep an eye out for the skipper. Oh and do me a favor, huh? Let me be the one who breaks the news to him? About Farragut? Got it?"

"Yes, sir." She watched him for a few moments. Then, as his eyes closed and his head started to fall back against the headrest, she asked, "You really think he'll come?"

Mitchell mumbled something unintelligible in response. He was already on the verge of unconsciousness.

She turned hesitantly to the door. She paused for a moment, then pulled it open and walked out, letting one more brief cacophony of casino noise into the office before it closed behind her and all was quiet once more.

CHAPTER 51

The Elephant in the Junk Heap

For perhaps the hundredth time in the several hours since they'd left *Enterprise* in their borrowed Romulan junk-heap, Kirk adjusted his position in the hard, straight-backed co-pilot's seat, which he'd long since decided was probably the most uncomfortable chair he'd ever had the misfortune to have to sat in. He had turned it sideways so he could stretch out his legs, which had helped—the old rust-bucket actually had foot pedals—but the chair still felt more like a brig cell bench than a pilot's seat.

A Tale of Two Cities lay open on his lap where he had been quietly reading it for the last few hours. It seemed smaller than he remembered—not in page count, but in size. It had always felt so huge when he was little. Running his fingers along the binding and the texture of the soft leather cover, it felt just as he remembered—and even smelled the same. Since fate conspired him to have the most unlikely traveling companion ever, who wasn't exactly the social type, he was glad he'd had the forethought to grab the book when he visited his mother. Otherwise the trip might have proven unbearable.

He let his gaze rise to the expressionless face of the Vulcan seated in the equally uncomfortable looking pilot's seat to his left. Spock looked odd somehow, dressed in something other than his Starfleet uniform, and while he could no doubt pull off the role of a Romulan merchant with his looks, Kirk pondered just what he might have to do if his credibility came into question.

Obviously the elephant in the room was their confrontation at the Academy, and there wasn't a big enough—or uncomfortable enough seat—to accommodate it.

His gaze lingered on his silent companion. What were the chances that the two of them would end up thrown together like this? Was it destiny? Was it Pike's revenge for having his world turned upside down? Had the captain of the *Enterprise* taken advantage of this 'perfect storm' to bottle him up with the very one who had vexed him so during his third year at the academy—who had almost gotten him kicked out for defeating Koby? Actually he'd settle for silence if it meant not dredging up what happened at Tycho IV again.

He shifted in his chair and dropped his gaze back to his book. The words on the page were a bit of a haze. Monumental issues far greater than been called out as a cheater by that Vulcan weighed heavy on him—so much so that he suddenly realized he had reread the same paragraph several times. Who was he trying to fool? His chair had nothing to do with his inability to concentrate. He looked back up at Spock, wondering if he was likewise uncomfortable with their situation. He didn't show it. No, he seemed perfectly content to continue sitting quietly, lost within the realm of his own thoughts, meditating between his occasional adjustments to the instruments and brief glances out through the viewport.

At least he suspected it was meditation. He had closed his eyes from time to time, and back at the academy McCoy had told him that Vulcans required very little sleep. A girlfriend of Gary's had once tried to introduce him to meditation. It was the best nap he'd ever had, he recalled Gary saying. His former girlfriend was not amused.

Spock must have sensed Kirk's gaze because he finally turned to him with a curious look on his face.

"You look like you want to ask me a question, Spock."

"Indeed, your choice of reading material has me curious." The Vulcan's voice sounded oddly loud to Kirk, coming after so many hours of silence.

"You mean this?" Kirk asked, raising the book slightly up off of his lap. "It belonged to my father."

"It is a highly inefficient means by which to access literary material."

"It's not meant to be efficient. It's meant to survive—something to be passed down. Something permanent."

Spock was evidently unmoved. "It is perplexing, the value you humans ascribe to the messenger rather than to the message itself."

"On the contrary, those messages are precisely what make objects like this so important. On Earth, without books, human civilization would still be in the dark ages." Kirk raised the book between them again for emphasis and then set it back down. "After the third world war, without books, Zefram Cochrane wouldn't have had what he needed to develop the warp engine. Did you know it was a high school physics book from twenty-sixteen that was ultimately his inspiration?" Kirk reflected for a moment, and then, concluded, "Books were the bootstraps by which we humans picked ourselves up off the floor."

"Why do humans feel obliged to communicate in metaphor?"

"Language is one of humanity's greatest achievements," Kirk countered. "A single word shuffled here or there can mean the difference between war and peace; between success and failure; between meaning and nonsense." He half-smiled as he recalled something. "Last night I shot an elephant in my pajamas, for example."

"Colonel Green," Spock confidently attributed Kirk's quote.

"Marx, actually," Kirk corrected him with a grin, enjoying a rare opportunity to correct a Vulcan.

Spock narrowed his eyes curiously at him. "Karl Marx?"

"*Groucho* Marx. He was a comedian from the twentieth century," Kirk explained. "Of course I don't expect you to be familiar with someone with a sense of humor, but Groucho Marx is the one who originally said it. *Colonel* Green just made it famous by saving human-kind."

"Ah, yes, the electronic Apocalypse—or 'e-pocalypse' as I believe was the colloquial name humans gave it," Spock started, "During Earth's latter twenty-first century when nearly ninety percent of the world's electronically stored data infrastruc-

ture was encrypted beyond recovery by a computer-engineered artificial intelligence called Pandora."

"Yes, and ironically, unlike the Pandora's box of Greek mythology, *this* Pandora tried to put everything back in the box. Had it not been for Colonel Green—and of course Groucho Marx—it would have succeeded."

"Colonel Green was a terrorist."

"One person's terrorist is another person's patriot. Let's not forget it was Colonel Green who ended the third world war by defeating Khan Singh in Australia."

"Equally ironic, because following his defeat of Singh, Green then held the collective governments of Earth hostage by threatening to do precisely what he had just prevented Singh from accomplishing. When world leaders did not capitulate to his ultimatum, *he* unleashed Pandora."

"Green did not *unleash* Pandora—not willingly at least—but that's beside the point. You're comparing apples and oranges, Spock," Kirk shot back, only drawing another confused look from his Vulcan comrade. "Both wanted entirely different things. Khan Noonian Singh was bent on conquering the known world reeling in the chaos and aftermath of the third world war and runaway climate shift. With Pandora, Singh hoped to bring down what little remained of civilization so he could accomplish his goal. Colonel Green stopped him."

"And then Colonel Green released Pandora himself."

"Green wanted to prevent war from ever happening again." Kirk cut him off. "He knew that the root cause of every war in human history was conflict over resources. With runaway climate change and the worldwide shortages of resources brought on by it—he knew there would be more Khan Singh's. Green truly believed that only by 'rebooting the world' as he put it, only with a fresh start could a new and better and more peaceful world evolve. Many even referred to him as 'the new Adam Smith.'"

"A gross miscalculation on Green's part because by unleashing Pandora, he prompted the utter and complete collapse of markets worldwide. Every bit of stored data in every database was encrypted even beyond Pandora's ability to ac-

cess it. This caused the collapse of *governments* worldwide, which was followed by chaos, anarchy, starvation and the deaths of millions in the third world war."

"Spock, Green was *never* going to unleash Pandora. It was a bluff—and the world called his bluff. Unfortunately before Green could capitulate, Pandora had already evolved to became self-aware and had decided that neither Singh nor Green was right—and unleashed itself. Green then defeated Pandora using mankind's ultimate weapon against the logic of computers—nonsense. What's every computer's primary directive? Above all else?" But before Spock could answer Kirk brought his hand down hard on *A Tale of Two Cities* resting on his lap.

"To answer a question! To compute!" Kirk pronounced loudly. "A computer cannot refuse to answer a question. But Pandora *couldn't* compute who was wearing the pajamas." Kirk then raised *A Tale of Two Cities* from his lap and opened the cover slowly. "All because Pandora couldn't do something this simple—read a book."

Kirk let it all sink in for a few moments, watching Spock process everything he'd said before concluding, "So in the end, Green was right. The fact that you and I are here arguing about it is proof of that."

"You construct your argument in a most obtuse fashion," Spock finally spoke, but then seemed to come to some sort of conclusion as his right eyebrow rose halfway to the ends of his bangs. "However, I believe I *am* finally beginning to understand humans," he finished.

"As Zefram Cochrane once said to one of your own mister Spock, 'Welcome to Earth.'"

Kirk smiled, but then it suddenly dawned on him—if ever there was an opportunity to once and for all dispense with their own particularly complicated past, that time was now. They could argue whether or not Colonel Green was a terrorist and other historical events, but the big elephant in the room was their history, and it wasn't wearing pajamas.

"You've changed, Spock, since I knew you at the academy," he said, breaking the silence.

Spock's eyebrows furrowed as he turned to face Kirk again. "Your use of the word *knew* is imprecise," he said. "Our relationship was not of such a nature." He paused and thought for a moment. and then added, "I am curious, however, as to how you believe that I have changed."

"You're not bitter," Kirk told him, putting it out there as plainly as he could.

"Bitter? I presume you are referring to the outcome of the Kobayashi Maru affair?" Spock reasoned, his face betraying no more emotion than if he were simply recalling what he'd had for breakfast.

"I half expected you to still be holding a grudge," Kirk baited. "Being half-human as it were," he baited.

"A grudge—a feeling of resentment—rancor—a chip on one's shoulder,"" Spock seemed to feel the need to define out loud.

"It's illogical I know," Kirk further baited by pretending to drop the subject. Spock walked into it.

"Setting aside the fact that I am a Vulcan, for Vulcans to harbor lingering misgivings about a decision over which they have no control would be pointless."

Kirk decided to push it. "So then you're okay that I defeated your test?"

"The Kobayashi Maru was not my test. I was simply one of many assigned to oversee it. Additionally, your use of the word defeat is imprecise. You did not defeat the original test. You reverse-engineered the programming code and created a different test."

"Whatever—and that doesn't bother you anymore?"

"Network failsafes were improperly secured," Spock stated in an even monotone. "The oversights were corrected."

"Because of me—what I did."

Spock raised an eyebrow and freely admitted, "Your assessment concurs with the official record."

"But you obviously don't agree—or didn't agree—when you called me out the way you did."

"Whether I agree or disagree is irrelevant."

"Spock, you accused me of cheating."

"Admiral Barnett accused you of cheating. I simply leveled a complaint. Again, all of which became irrelevant after the findings of the second hearing officially closed the matter."

"Officially, yes, but what about personally?" He studied him for a moment. "Spock, it's just you and me now—no academy board, no one listening, no one judging, nobody keeping records. Just you and me."

Spock made a sound that just might have been a sigh of frustration, and Kirk perceived it.

"I submit to you, Spock, that my solution fell well within acceptable guidelines. Real or simulated, my ship and crew were in danger. Failure was not an option. I was obligated morally and by duty to consider and utilize any and all possibilities to save ship and crew. Hell, if I had to go down to engineering and manhandle the warp core myself to get the ship out of danger, I would have done that. Something tells me you would have too."

Spock sat there for a few moments, then raised his eyebrows expectantly. "I'm sorry. Are you waiting for me to say something?"

Kirk studied him for a long few moments. "Not at all." Then he smiled again. "But let me go on the record by saying that I believe your game may not be chess, but poker."

"I am unfamiliar with poker."

"Right," Kirk replied, making sure he soaked the word with more than enough sarcasm to satisfy even Gary.

A light started flashing green on the instrument panel, accompanied by a simple beeping that drew Spock's attention. "We are approaching the rendezvous co-

ordinates you programmed," he reported as he touched off several controls in a brief flurry.

"Dropping to impulse power in three, two, one…" Kirk counted down.

The vessel lurched suddenly and quite violently, almost as if it had been tied to a hitching post and its rope had just snapped taught, throwing Kirk and Spock into the console. Then everything shuddered and vibrated loudly, sounding almost as if the ship might literally fly apart as it dropped out of warp and back into normal space. Both men glanced at each other for one brief second, and Kirk could have sworn that he almost saw Spock unnerved.

"Mister Scott wasn't joking," Kirk said as he let go of the edge of the console and sat back carefully, curling his fingers in and out to restore blood flow to his knuckles.

They both looked out through the canopy to discover that they were hurtling toward the gray-swept brown and white globe of Cestus at break-neck speed. In that first instant it looked as though they weren't going to be able to slow down in time to avoid smashing right into the planet, but Spock's calm, expert hands deftly danced over the instruments and their approach slowed dramatically to a leisurely speed.

"The planet Cestus III," Spock observed, apparently recognizing the world on sight. No doubt he had a vast knowledge of the various inhabited planets in the known galaxy.

"Yes." Kirk eyed it suspiciously. "Sorry I couldn't tell you."

"You are my superior officer. That is your prerogative."

Kirk looked at Spock, perhaps for the first time with the cold realization that he indeed was the skipper of the Farragut. Charlie Garrovick was not coming back. Even stranger yet—he did indeed outrank Spock.

"This is a highly disputed region of space," Spock analyzed. "To rendezvous with Farragut here would seem imprudent."

"True, but our failure to contact Farragut would seem to preclude any rendezvous," Kirk responded, sounding almost Vulcan himself. He grinned. Was being Vulcan contagious?

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Without Farragut, my return to Enterprise will prove problematic."

"Well I guess that means you're coming with me," Kirk said as he poked at the instruments.

"Evidently," Spock agreed, his eyebrows raised. "Where are we going?"

"Naska Starport."

"I have never been to Naska Starport," Spock offered, "but I understand that it enjoys a singular reputation as the center for all illegal activities in this sector."

"I can certainly vouch for that." Kirk said with a bit of resignation.

Suddenly, an urgent sounding and much shriller beeping cut in—obviously a warning klaxon of some kind, accompanied by a bright flashing red light in the center of the pilot's console. Spock quickly silenced the alarm and then checked a new set of readings that had just appeared on the scanner display. "There are two Klingon D-six battlecruisers approaching on an intercept course," he reported blandly.

Kirk leaned in quickly and peered at the display, obviously caught by surprise. "Well that solves the mystery why Farragut didn't answer our hails." He said rhetorically.

What the hell were the Klingons doing here? And where was Farragut?

"Our de-warp will have been detected," Spock offered.

The communications panel whistled as if on cue. Then a deep, guttural voice broke loudly over the channel and barked something that sounded to Kirk like an angry tirade of senseless gibberish.

"They are hailing us," Spock again offered the obvious, but before Kirk could snap at him, added, "They are demanding that we prepare to be boarded and searched."

"I didn't know you knew Klingon too," Kirk said with a frown, even as he watched one of the enemy vessels approaching them.

"He is speaking Romulan, not Klingon," Spock informed him. "We are in a Romulan vessel."

"Thoughtful of them," Kirk commented insincerely.

Suddenly Spock flipped a second switch and barked back in an equally harsh tone most unlike his stoic self, then muted the channel.

"What the hell did you just do?" Kirk's eyes widened as he burned his gaze suspiciously on him.

"I identified our vessel as the Romulan scout ship Theros. I told them we are enroute to Naska Spaceport." Apparently picking up on Kirk's unease, he added, "While Vulcans cannot lie, they are not precluded from choosing how to communicate the truth."

What the hell? Kirk's brain yelled in his head as he frowned so hard he swore the wrinkles in his forehead were squeezing his frontal lobes. Suddenly the speaker barked more gibberish.

"Switch on the universal translator," Kirk instructed Spock suspiciously.

"We are both speaking Romulan, Captain," Spock tactfully reminded him. "To do so would raise suspicion."

"Right—yes, of course," Kirk shot back in agreement, annoyed with himself for even having suggested it.

Spock reopened the channel, responded harshly in Romulan to the Klingon's last tirade, and then muted the channel again and turned back to Kirk.

"What did you say?" Kirk's tone rose. He suddenly felt that familiar vertigo—like the situation was spiraling out of his control.

"I told them we are on a classified mission and not to interfere."

"You did?" Kirk's tone shifted to genuine surprise.

"It is a sound tactic—and it was truthful. If we are on a classified mission, our refusal to discuss the details should forestall suspicion."

"Nicely played," Kirk admitted hesitantly, as though bordering on some sort of religious epiphany.

"Thank you—I believe is the appropriate response," Spock returned after a slight pause.

"Thank me later. Right now we need to finish the game."

Suddenly, and he didn't quite know why, but he had a feeling that he could actually trust this Vulcan who had once been the bane of his very existence.

That guttural barking tore at the speaker once more, this time in a much longer tirade. Spock listened calmly with no apparent reaction, then turned to Kirk to translate. "He was unimpressed with my last response."

"Have faith, my Vulcan friend. The game's not over yet." Kirk shot another smile at him before his smile faded with an afterthought. "You're sure that's all they said? It sounded like a lot more."

"It is the most economical translation, minus the usual Klingon embellishments."

"Fine. Then tell them to process our code immediately and let us pass or you will have him executed for interfering." Kirk studied Spock's quizzical expression before smiling again. "You started this."

Spock gazed at Kirk for a moment, then complied. Several uncomfortably long moments later, the Klingon's voice exploded over the speaker for another lengthy tirade.

"They repeat their last message," Spock translated. "We are ordered to stand by to be boarded."

"Tell him permission is denied, and that we are preparing to land on their ship."

Spock's eyebrow shot nearly to his bangs. "We are?"

"And tell their skipper to meet us immediately for a subspace conference with Chancellor Gast."

"Do you believe this is wise?"

"We're well past wise, Spock. Just do it."

Spock's second eyebrow joined the first as he briefly hesitated briefly before he complied with Kirk's instructions.

"Now alter course directly toward them and make it look deliberate," Kirk quickly added before the raspy voice had a chance to break in again.

Spock adjusted their course and turned down the gain on communications as the Klingon responded. "They now say they are preparing to beam aboard and have ordered us to drop our shields," Spock relayed when the Klingon's increasingly more angry tirade finally ended.

Kirk could almost picture the Klingon spitting as he screamed, the veins buldging down the center of his forehead. Klingons didn't react well to having their authority challenged.

"Denied," he shot back, motioning toward the panel. Spock relayed the message in Romulan, and then Kirk reached across the console himself, pushed Spock's hand out of the way, and closed the channel.

"Now we wait." Kirk leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs.

Spock eyed him curiously and asked, "For what are we waiting?"

"For them to fold." Kirk smiled at an even more confused Spock.

"To fold what?" Spock asked, growing increasingly more confused.

"Your first lesson in poker, Mister Spock. We just went all-in. The longer they think about it, the better our chances get."

"They could of course simply open fire on us."

"They could. We'll see," Kirk said, grinning slightly again.

"I find your cavalier attitude most disconcerting given our circumstances."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the response came in a much shorter and quite terse tone of voice—and obviously from someone else. Spock's eyebrows furrowed once more as he severed contact. "Fascinating. We are ordered to continue on to Naska."

"There you go," Kirk said with a renewed grin as Spock altered their course back to their original heading.

"I shall endeavor to investigate this poker at my earliest opportunity."

CHAPTER 52

The *Orion's Belt* Casino

Their trip into Naska had been relatively uneventful following their less than cordial encounter with the Klingon security detail that had unintentionally likely saved lives by impounding their poor excuse for a spacecraft after landing on the outskirts of the city.

As he and Spock trudged through the calf-deep snow in the darkness of night. Kirk switched *A Tale of Two Cities* from his right hand to his left, then thrusted his right into the pocket of the slightly too small cold weather jacket he'd managed to rustle up from one of Scotty's engineering team. If only he had remembered to bring gloves as well. He was also beginning to regret hauling that damn book along now too. He felt distinctly stupid. Spock was right. It was most inefficient in every way possible.

Wearing a Romulan version of a sarape made from a dark woven mesh of some fabric that looked like wool, Spock looked like an old man. The snowflakes sticking to his straight black hair and atop his eyebrows completed the illusion. He wondered for a moment if this is what his companion might look like several decades from now—assuming either of them made it another day at all.

And now his left hand was cold to the bone. He shoved the cumbersome book in the nook of his right arm, flexing it to anchor it snugly against his side while putting his left hand into his other pocket.

Where was *Farragut?* And why were the Klingons here? He began to entertain the very real possibility that not only might Cain be out of the picture, but Gary as well, for he certainly would have fled with *Farragut* in order to warn Starfleet. Yes,

there was a distinct possibility that he and Spock were on their own now, and would have to scramble for another way to get to his father. Unfortunately this meant a reunion with someone he despised.

Harry Mudd. Even his name seemed appropriate, if not something hard to unimagine. But as much as he despised Harry, and rightfully so, he had no choice now but to turn to him for help. And oh how Harry would enjoy that.

He and Spock double-timed it across the snow-blanketed street and entered the back entrance of the *Orion's Belt* Casino as inconspicuously as they could. He hadn't seen snow since his days at the Tarsus Academy. Trudging through it for just under an hour, he was pretty sure he no longer missed it.

Modeled after one of the most infamous pleasure palaces on the Orion home world, the *Orion's Belt* still looked just as he remembered—brightly lit, noisy, and full of life—as it were—from all corners of the explored and unexplored galaxy. He quickly spotted the entrance to the casino lounge on the periphery and wasted no time in heading there with Spock in tow.

In stark contrast to the flashy casino floor, the lounge was dim and full of deep shadows and dark corners, broken only by pools of light.

Clouds of smoke from burning plant life as diverse as the clientele hovered in a thick haze near the ceiling.

Just as he had during his previous visits, he felt as though he'd just walked into one of those seedy underworld hangouts he'd seen in so many old movies from the twentieth century. The room was loud and crowded.

Consistent with the casino's theme, the non-automated servers were all remarkably attractive—especially the humanoid ones. The Orion girls in particular were perhaps the closest to genetically perfect he could imagine. His mind briefly shifted back to his oft-time distraction, Gaila, at the Academy. She was the smartest woman he'd ever known but she smiled too much.

Enclaves of humanoid patrons huddled at some of the tables, but here and there pockets of non-humans gathered into small groups, with each keeping pretty much to its own kind. There were even a couple corner tables that were com-

pletely airtight, enclosed with atmospheres poisonous to others but life-giving to whatever was inside. They were a cross between a museum diorama and an aquarium. Now that he looked a little closer at one, it was indeed filled with water, and the beings floating inside reminded him of dolphins—at least in the face. Along with them was another that reminded him of a hammerhead shark.

He got a bit of a kick out of seeing several blue-skinned Andorians and some swine-like Tellarites that had been forced to share a table—strange bedfellows forced together in the common misery of the Klingon occupation.

He'd seen an old Earth movie one time called *Casablanca* that echoed similar themes. How people ever could stand looking at flickering images on a big screen baffled him. In that story there was a man named Rick who ran a place like this—but Harry was no Rick. Harry was an asshole.

He spotted one unusual being at the bar puffing a purple haze of smoke from what looked like an oversized cigar in its ear—if that was his ear. Actually now that he'd seen the aquarium table, this one was as close to normal as it might get.

He heard a bubbling noise to his left, and when he looked, his gaze fell on a group of—nope, not a group—it was just one being, spouting several short elephant trunk-like mouths or breathing appendages—or whatever—and it had monopolized a large hookah all by itself, with hookah hoses attached to each one of its whatevers. A larger gauge and shorter chimney-like whatever puffed smoke up at the ceiling. There were even some sort of insects fluttering around in the smoke. Now that image was going to stick in his mind.

Then in what proved to be the most disturbing spectacle of all. In a group of three obviously very drunk Klingon soldiers, one had bent over and had dropped his pants, baring his very hairy buttocks, in the crack of which a rather long cigar had been stuffed. A second drunken Klingon soldier stood, or rather tried to stand, behind him, and was attempting to light the cigar. All three were bellowing with drunken laughter until the one doing the lighting accidentally lit the hair of his bent-over comrade's ass on fire, which sent a bright plume of flame flashing upward. The one doing the lighting jumped back and tried to put out the fire with his boot, giving the bent-over soldier several kicks in the backside, burying the ci-

gar in a burst of orange sparks deep into his comrade's blazing butt crack, which sent him stumbling forward to crash into a table full of frightened humans, who quickly bolted from their seats to avoid their drinks being spilled on them. Meanwhile, the soldier who had done the kicking suddenly noticed his boot was on fire and began to stomp it on the floor while the third began to laugh so hard he began to hack and choke to the point where he threw up on the floor, then stumbled forward, stepped in the vomit, slipped and fall flat on his back.

Yes, Harry ran a class joint.

Then he noticed that both he and Spock had actually stopped in their tracks to witness the spectacle, and both had then turned to look at one another as if to reassure each other what they were seeing was real.

Kirk smirked and turned to continue walking, drawing Spock along with him through the crowd toward an empty booth he'd spotted clearing out. Ducking and dodging around one 'patron' after another and being careful not to make eye contact with anyone—which was easy in some cases as it was hard to discern an eye from a whatever—they reached the booth and sat down across the table from one another. Kirk set his book beside him on the seat just as one of the spherical autoservers floated up beside their table. Kirk waved it off and it swooshed away.

"Would I be correct to assume that we are here to meet someone?" Spock finally asked, raising his voice slightly over the noise.

"Good question," Kirk said a little loudly so Spock could hear him over the noise. When he noticed Spock's quizzical expression, he elaborated. "The less you know, the better."

"This would be difficult, inasmuch as I know nothing."

Was that a joke? Had he just witnessed Vulcan humor?

Just then one of the female green-skinned Orion servers appeared beside their table interrupting the moment. Spectacularly attractive, slim and toned, and wearing what probably amounted to less fabric that made up the collar of her jacket, she smiled at Spock and asked him something in what Kirk presumed was a Romu-

lan language. Spock responded to her in kind. Then she then turned to Kirk and asked him in perfect English, "And what about you? What's your poison?"

Kirk smiled. "Beer. Something from Earth—in a bottle."

"You got it," she said and turned to walk off.

"To expect one to order poison in a bar is not logical," Spock furrowed his eyebrows.

Kirk said nothing, or didn't hear Spock at all as his eyes lingered on the bare backside of their Orion server as she walked away. Spock noted this.

"While at Starfleet Academy I mentored an exceptionally gifted first-year cadet majoring in linguistics," Spock offered in a helpful tone, drawing Kirk's perplexed gaze back to his.

"Huh?"

"She had a roommate who was Orion."

"Oh. Right," Kirk replied, really not interested as his gaze drifted back to the green siren once again. "I wonder if she really is Orion though," he said. "Sounded to me like she spoke pretty good Romulan."

"She was not speaking Romulan. She was speaking Vulcan," Spock corrected him.

"Vulcan?" Kirk asked, snapping his eyes back to his traveling companion. "How the hell did she know you were Vulcan?"

"Orion women are very perceptive," Spock pointed out.

Kirk's eyes shifted once again to the Orion waitress, but this time with a hint of concern on his face. "Well let's hope she doesn't feel obligated to pass along the fact that there's a Vulcan in the bar."

"Orion women are also known for their discretion." Spock's tone seemed to come with a hint of experience and mystery. "We have nothing to fear."

"Yeah? Well I knew a girl from Orion back at the Academy too. A Red-head." Kirk suddenly remembered and half-smiled before he realized it. "Natural."

"Gaila," Spock answered matter-of-factly.

"Right," Kirk answered almost wistfully before frowning at Spock. "Wait—you knew Gaila?"

"I knew her roommate, Uhura." Spock answered, followed by a few moments of being studied by Kirk. "Although Gaila and I often engaged in conversations about the early development of quantum computing. Her knowledge on the subject was most extensive—so much so, in fact, that I approved a special internship directly under me in the Advanced Computer Sciences Lab."

"We're talking Gaila? Really nice…" Kirk started to motion with his hands over his own chest, but caught himself and pretended he had simply meant to clasp his hands together and lean his elbows on the table. He narrowed his eyes at Spock suspiciously, who only gave him a rather unnervingly blank expression in return.

"She was the only cadet from the Orion Colonies attending the Academy." Spock offered.

"Seriously? You knew Gaila?" Kirk was still fixated on this new revelation.

"I am always serious." Spock deadpanned.

"No—I mean—never mind…" Suddenly something occurred to him. "Okay, wow, so wait—that's how Giala had access to the ACSC? That's the one part that never added up before—her access to the ACSC—and Koby. You?"

Spock's face betrayed nothing.

"Wait—*that's* how you knew? That's how you figured it all out—that I'd gotten past the security protocols? Gaila told you? I always thought it was me being such an ass during the test that tipped you off."

"Gaila revealed nothing to me. Indeed, my suspicions were heightened by your cavalier behavior during your third attempt at the Kobayashi Maru."

This was a late hit. "Wait a second. You stood up and accused me of cheating in front of the entire class! Are you saying that when you did that—you had no proof?" Kirk's voice rose loudly before he reigned it in.

"In the conventional sense, I did not. But your response that followed confirmed my suspicions."

"You mean you gambled that I'd assume that you actually had evidence—which I *did* by the way—and then I just walked right into it?"

"Walked into what?" Spock seemed confused.

"Wow. Just what would you have done had I not fallen for your clever little ruse?"

"That probability was unlikely. My calculations were nearly ninety-seven point two percent certain."

"Ninety-seven...certain of what? How do you even calculate something like that? Never mind. Wow. Just—wow," Kirk's tone was almost a whisper before he locked eyes with Spock. "You cheated."

"I did not. I simply reduced related events to an equation.

Kirk couldn't figure out if he was angry or dumfounded or both—or neither. Whatever it was, he was speechless.

"The programming of the Kobayashi Maru test makes the outcome one-hundred-percent predictable. That was known. An exhaustive diagnostic of the programming architecture indicated that programming had indeed been altered. That was known. The results of your third test were known. Who had reprogrammed the test was unknown. The solution was a simple matter of basic algebra. Solve for the variable."

"Spock, other people's lives are not math problems! You had no proof. You suspected I was guilty but you couldn't prove it. So you threw a hail Mary. You went all-in. You figured that when you accused me, I'd defend myself, rather than outright lie."

"And I was correct."

"You were *lucky*." Kirk fell silent for a few moments, then having seemingly resolved some great inner decision, he looked Spock squarely in the eyes.

"For the record, since we're laying our cards on the table as it were—when I defeated Koby, I wasn't interested in winning—okay, winning was kind of nice but that wasn't what it was all about. Spock, have you ever asked yourself why? Why I did what I did? Why the powers-that-be were so bent out of shape afterwards? Why they shut down the inquiry and why we were ordered on pain of death never to discuss it?"

Spock seemed about to reply when Kirk charged ahead.

"Well, I'm going to tell you why—right here—right now. Right here in the ass-end of the galaxy, I'm going to tell it all and I don't even know why—well other than for the fact that we may die here soon—probably because before that, I just think you should know—so here goes. Are you ready? I was pissed off."

Spock was obviously not prepared for that, and his expression showed it—or didn't as it were. He simply stared back at him.

"Yeah, and everything I said earlier on that piece of junk Romulan death trap too, but mostly? I was pissed off as hell. My senior dissertation had been rejected because I exposed and argued that the Starfleet Defense Network was vulnerable—and what's more? Unlike *you*, I actually *had* proof. I was right and they knew it—but do you think that mattered? No. I was told—no—I was ordered to not only come up with a whole new dissertation, but sworn to absolute secrecy over anything having to do with my original one. That's right, Spock—you're not the only one that knows computers. You may know the nuts and bolts, but you show me a computer and I'll show you what's broken. And, so, that's why I did what I did. And I not only showed them, I shoved it in their face too."

"The Kobayashi Maru test utilizes the Starfleet Defense Network kernel?" Spock now had his own epiphany.

"It *did*. Not anymore. Yeah. I knew something you didn't—and I couldn't even gloat about it because I was sworn to secrecy. But you want to know the *real* kicker? I knew that by doing what I did, your ego was so big you'd stop at nothing in your efforts to shitcan me and that would give Starfleet a collective kick in the ass to *fix* the problem—which in turn secured the SDN—all without having to

break secrecy. How about that, huh? Sorry to just lay it all on you like that at once, but well—sometimes, you know? You just ask for it."

"What the hell's he doing here?" Someone suddenly slid into the booth next to him, surprising both of them. It was Cain, dressed much as he had been the last time he saw him in New York.

"Don't act so surprised. I was already here before they showed up," Cain said as he eyed the Klingons.

"Now we're *all* stranded," Kirk stated the obvious. He noticed Cain eyeing Spock with suspicion and decided that an introduction was in order. "This is…" he started, but Cain quickly cut him off.

"I know who he is. I just don't know what he's doing here."

"It's a long story. Gary was supposed to meet me here too, but he and Farragut are thankfully nowhere to be found." He scanned the rest of the room, frowning.

"We have to find a way out of here somehow," Cain repeated, only half-listening.

"A friend of Gary's runs this place. If I can find him, maybe he can help us."

"How do you know?"

"I don't—but that's all I got since *you* obviously don't have a plan." Then his gaze locked onto a thin, overly-dressed-up man with the air of self-importance who was making his way through the crowd. "Let me out." He paused while Cain stood up out of his way, then quickly slid out of the booth. "Wait here."

And with that, Kirk was off, leaving Cain and Spock other across the table from each other, with Spock gazing down at the table, seemingly deep in thought.

"What the hell's wrong with you? Someone kill you dog?"

"It has been a day of unexpected revelations," Spock's voice seemed almost heavy with regret.

CHAPTER 53

The Module

Mitchell woke with a start, snapping his head forward from where it had rested against the back of Harry's extraordinarily comfortable executive's chair. He'd known he was tired, of course. His face felt hot—either from too much sun in the desert or windburn from their walk through the snow. Whichever it was, it'd taken a lot out of him and at some point he'd nodded off with his feet propped up on the desk and his ankles crossed.

As he gazed over the toes of his shoes, suddenly he saw Ross staring back at him with a perplexed expression on her face. He parted his feet and peered between them, and saw the reason for her expression. The clothes she'd changed into back at the desert base were gone—replaced by what had to be one of the skimpiest outfits he'd ever seen a woman wear in public, and he'd seen plenty of skimpy outfits.

Small tan-brown roughly triangular patches of what looked like some kind of animal hide that had been torn rather than cut from the source covered her breasts and not much more, held in place by their firmness and with lengths of leather-like twine that wrapped around her neck, shoulders, and upper torso where they were apparently tied in back. A thin rectangular strip of the same material hung loosely from a gold mesh belt that rested low on her hips, barely covering her groin, and behind that he could see the bottom edge of a similar piece hanging down over her backside. A wide choker made of the same thin mesh gold as her belt fit tightly around her neck, and solid golden bracelets hung loosely around each of her wrists and jingled when she moved them. She looked like something

between an ancient Egyptian goddess and a cavewoman, and from where he sat Mitchell couldn't tell if she was wearing anything beneath her loincloth or not.

"I thought I told you to keep an eye out for Jim."

"Harry got nervous with me just standing around doing nothing, so he sent me back in here."

"He should have sent your clothes with you," Mitchell remarked.

"He said I would attract less attention if I looked like I worked here. He wanted to tint my skin green." Her tone sounded confused. Every woman he'd ever met who had had to put up with Harry's bullshit for any length of time sounded like that—that or they had tried to kill him—or both. If they stayed at the casino long enough, perhaps even Ross would probably want to kill him.

"Did you want to be green?" he responded as he gazed at those beautifully lithe legs that he'd been thinking about since he saw them back at the base.

"Apparently he has a drug that will turn your skin green—not permanently."

"Huh," Mitchell remarked, suddenly uninterested, then swept his feet from Harry's desk and dropped them to the floor, where he began to pull on his boots. He noticed she'd walked over to sit down on the couch next to where they'd tossed their winter coats earlier, absent-mindedly drawing one of them over her legs for warmth. She looked lost, vulnerable—and adorable.

Suddenly something occurred to him. "How long have I been asleep?"

"Just over two hours."

"Two hours?" He could have sworn it had only been a few minutes, despite the fact that the stiffness in his neck was trying to tell him otherwise. He bolted from the chair and started toward the door. "Why didn't you wake me up?"

"There was no reason, and you obviously needed the rest."

"Where the hell is that idiot?" he muttered impatiently as he turned his eyes to the door. Then he glanced at her sitting on the couch and remarked, "You really

look—ridiculous." She didn't really look ridiculous, of course. In fact she looked sexy as hell, but he'd be damned if he was going to let her know he thought that.

She met his glance, then dropped her gaze and frowned, just barely, and asked, "Do you really think Captain Kirk will actually make it here?"

"You keep asking me that. How the hell do I know?" he answered as he reached for the door knob.

"Who is the Spaniard?"

Mitchell grasped the knob but didn't turn it, drew a deep breath and exhaled loudly as he pierced the door with his eyes. "I told you already."

"Yes, but I'm curious why you're so afraid of him"

"Who says I'm afraid of him? And him is actually a her—well most of the time anyway. It's a complicated alien thing."

"An alien with a name like the Spaniard?"

"It's *complicated*." He emphasized the word again, strongly enough to where she seemed to lose interest and began to adjust the metal bracelet on her wrist, which was a little snug.

Just about to look at the door again, he suddenly noticed what looked like some sort of men's formalwear laying over the arm of the couch beside him. He lifted the sleeve curiously. "What the hell is this?"

"Harry left that for you." After a moment, she added, "He said you looked like a schmuck?"

"Yeah? I'll wear it to his funeral—which is going to be real soon if he doesn't get his ass back in here!"

"What is this artifact you two were talking about?"

"What?" he snapped before he could stop. Then he relented...almost. "Why didn't you just ask him? You two are a lot alike you know. You both talk way too much."

"He doesn't like me much," she answered simply.

"Well for once Harry and I agree on something," he responded, then realized he was being mean again. "Sorry. Look—it's a spear—well actually, not a whole spear—just the head of the spear."

"Why is it so valuable?" Ross' curiosity was obviously piqued.

"Supposedly it was the spear used by the Roman centurion to pierce Jesus while he was up on the cross…if you believe that sort of thing. Harry's been chasing around after it for years now."

"The Holy Lance," Ross remarked, raising her eyebrows in revelation. "The Lance of Longinus, also known more colorfully as the Spear of Destiny."

"Exactly. Whatever. So now you know."

"But it went missing from the Hofburg Museum in Vienna, Austria during the opening days of the third world war.. It has not been seen since."

"And it won't," Mitchell remarked sardonically with a sideward glance at the closed door.

"Even before it disappeared, it's veracity had been challenged for centuries."

Mitchell turned to her. "Do me a favor, huh, professor? Look at me. See this expression? Memorize it for future reference. This is me not interested."

The office door suddenly rattled as if someone had either fallen or been pushed against it. Mitchell whipped out his phaser and aimed it at the door as he and Ross both spun toward it and waited. Then, when it finally opened and Harry walked in looking somewhat relieved but tarnished with irritation, Mitchell lowered his phaser and laid into him. "Where the hell have you been?"

"Why aren't you dressed?" Harry shot back at him, but just as Mitchell was about to unload on him, Kirk suddenly walked in behind him, followed in turn by two others he didn't immediately recognize, the last of whom closed the door behind them.

"Jim?"

"Gary," Kirk said as he handed the book to the older man behind him.

Mitchell's eyes lit up as he nearly leapt to his old friend and embraced him hard. "Man am I glad to see you!" Taken aback by Gary's uncharacteristically overt display of affection, Kirk nonetheless returned his embrace and the two men patted each other on the back. "I wasn't sure you would make it."

"I could say the same about you," Kirk replied. Then, as they released each other, he looked over at one of the men who had come in with him, and Mitchell followed his gaze. "You remember Varian Cain?" he introduced.

"Long time," Mitchell said, nodding his head with sudden recognition.

"Well you've changed," Cain remarked as he looked Mitchell over.

"And Lieutenant Commander Spock from Enterprise," Kirk finished. Mitchell gazed with questioning surprise at Kirk, who ignored his expression as he introduced him and Ross to Cain and Spock. "My X.O., Lieutenant Commander Gary Mitchell, and Lieutenant Lisa Ross."

"How the hell did you get in?" Mitchell asked.

"Romulan scout ship," Kirk answered. Then, on seeing Mitchell's confused expression, he added, "Long story."

"Well, I'll take a ride in a Romulan scout ship over being stuck here any day," Mitchell remarked. "When do we leave?"

"The vessel was impounded upon our arrival," Spock informed.

Kirk looked around. "Well I'm just glad Farragut made it out before all this went down."

A silent look passed between Mitchell and Ross that Kirk missed, but the following awkward silence even he couldn't miss. He turned to study Mitchell. "What?"

"Jim," Mitchell finally began, solemnly, pausing to search for the right words—the words he had been dreading having to say for the last several hours. Then he decided that the direct approach was the best approach. "Farragut's gone."

"Right. Good call. Not sure how we're going to get out of here now but good call."

"No. You don't understand, Jim. Farragut didn't go anywhere. The Klingons attacked while we were down here. She's gone. Ross and I…we saw her burn up in the desert."

"Farragut's gone?" Cain broke in, looking incredulously at Mitchell.

Kirk suddenly found it hard to breathe as a wave of dizziness washed over him. He stepped past Cain and Spock and faced the door. It was the same feeling he'd experienced in the taxi in New York when Cain told him his father was still alive.

"I'm sorry, Jim," Mitchell said to his back.

"First Tycho, now this…" Kirk all but whispered to no one in particular as he stared at the door. A muffled silence blanketed the room as Kirk tried to withstand the weight of what he had just been told.

Harry finally broke the moment. "Yeah, well, this is all heartbreaking, but we're in a bit of a time crunch here—"

"Shut up!" Mitchell snapped angrily, and Harry did. Harry shrugged in silent response, then ran his eyes over Ross and shook his head disapprovingly, which she noticed.

Mitchell turned to look at Kirk, whose back was still to him. He knew his old friend well enough to understand the pain he was feeling.

Kirk drew a deep breath and mustered what little reserve of fortitude he had left, penned up his emotions, and turned back around to face the others. "Harry's right," he said with just a brief hint of wavering in his otherwise firm tone. "We've got to focus on our immediate concerns, the first of which is how we're going to get out of here."

"Well as it just so happens, that's exactly what old Harry and I have been working on, haven't we, Harry?" Mitchell put his hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed it a little too hard, causing Harry to wince.

"I submit that our first course of action should be to find a means by which to warn Starfleet," Spock offered. "The presence of Klingon military forces here could be an indication that they are massing for a full-scale invasion."

"They aren't massing for an invasion, for God's sake," Cain shot at the Vulcan. "They're looking for us—for Jimmy and me"

Kirk met Cain's eyes. "No—he's right." Spock's eyebrows rose precipitously in surprise, as did Mitchell's.

"We can't just go running off without warning Starfleet first."

"Jimmy, this is much more important. Lives are at stake—" Cain cut himself short with a sidelong glance at everyone else. "If we don't do what must be done, everything all of us here stands for will be lost."

"That's somewhat epic," Mitchell chimed in, a little rattled by Cain's words. "What's he talking about Jim?" But Kirk ignored his friend and turned to lock his gaze on Cain.

"I know how it must seem, but we need to stick to the plan—"

"He just lost his ship, Cain." Mitchell's voice rose sharply before he could stop himself as he defended his friend.

"She was my ship, too, Jimmy," Cain locked his eyes on Kirk after ignoring Mitchell. "And she was your father's ship before that. You think I don't feel her loss, too? Do you want all those lives to have been lost for nothing?"

"We're Starfleet officers, Cain," Kirk rebuked him in a controlled, hushed tone. "We have a duty—"

"We have a *duty* to go get your father, Jimmy." Cain countered strongly, drawing reactions from everyone.

"Sorry?" Mitchell broke in.

"My father's still alive," Kirk answered before he realized what he was doing.

"What?" Mitchell repeated himself in a shriller tone of voice.

"Jimmy!" Cain warned sharply, and then the room fell silent, with everybody locked onto him, eyes wide with shock.

"It's time someone else knows—if neither of us make it," Kirk said, cutting him off, which drew an unexpected double-take from Cain, and no further argument.

"Can we—I'm sorry?" Mitchell's words stumbled out. "What about your father?"

Kirk turned to his friend and spoke directly to him. "He's still alive. My father's still alive." He then turned to lock eyes with everyone else. "It's true." And then the room fell silent as everyone processed this. Kirk turned to Cain. "Show them the module." Cain remained motionless. "Either you show them the module or I'm just going to tell them everything I know."

After a moment of hesitation, Cain reached into his pocket and pulled out the very old but familiar looking memory module and handed it to Kirk,who took it and then glared at Harry and asked him, "You got something that can play this?"

Harry smirked at the module and answered, "I run a casino, not a museum."

"I believe I can be of assistance," Spock offered. He reached inside his oversized overcoat and produced a tricorder. Kirk handed Spock the module and he stepped over to Harry's desk where he set it flat, then simply laid the old memory module on the universal access surface. After a few moments a shimmering, luminescent cloud of holographic static appeared directly above the tricorder in mid-air and flickered randomly.

"Lights Harry," Kirk turned on Harry who was near the door.

Harry grimaced and rolled his eyes with agitation. "Lights low," he barked, advertising the fact that he was annoyed at being told to do something that anybody could have done just as easily. The lights dimmed, casting the room into shadows.

Spock tinkered with the tricorder's controls. Seconds later the hologram brightened and became the main source of illumination in the room.

"Should I rustle up some popcorn?" Harry interjected sarcastically, only to be ignored by everyone.

"There," Spock concluded as the lumiscent hologram static coalesced into a very familiar Klingon face from the past.

"George, my old friend," the Klingon began, speaking in a deep, authoritative baritone, but with an altogether strange friendly kindness not often heard coming from a Klingon.

"Kalor Arkanon," Spock supplied, raising his eyebrows in recognition.

"Yes." Kirk moved closer, his face illuminated in the hologram's bluish luminescence, as was everyone else's.

The ghostly Klingon resurrected from the past continued. "I am sorry for the way you are receiving this message from me so close to our upcoming summit, but times are grave and I cannot risk its being intercepted through normal diplomatic channels. The fact that you are seeing me like this means that I did not make it to the summit, and that I am most likely dead. There is a conspiracy, George, involving several high-level officials on both my side and yours. They do not share our vision, my friend."

Everyone's eyes were transfixed in open-mouthed awe as the luminescent glow from the hologram strobed off their faces, and as Arkanon's flickering image continued.

"On my side, my top general, Gast, is at the very heart of it. He has allied himself with others whom I have not yet been able to identify. I have encoded valuable data on this module that details this conspiracy and identifies other chief operatives. Suffice to say, this conspiracy is vast and poses a grave threat to the success of the peace process. It is up to you now, my friend. You must take this information and expose these traitors to your people and to mine. They must know the truth. Our sons and daughters must know the truth about their fathers, and all must know that peace is the only way. Don't let it end, George. You must go on without me. Good luck, my old friend. Qapla'!"

The hologram wavered, rippled and flickered, then burst into a cloud of static that strobed off everyone's faces, all registering shock at the scope of what had just been revealed to them.

"Well we all know what happened at the summit," Cain said in a tone of voice filled with resignation, finally breaking that silence. "There's a lot more on here—names, secret documents, and so on. Proof that could implicate a large number of traitors on both sides."

Another long silence ensued as Spock lifted the module from the tricorder and handed it back to Cain.

Spock pressed something on the tricorder and the static luminescent cloud vanished, plunging the room into darkness before Ross helpfully reached over and turned on the small lamp on Harry's desk, casting a pool of light onto the desk and underlighting everyone's faces.

Finally Kirk turned to Mitchell again. "So what's this big plan of yours and Harry's?"

"You're not going to like it."

CHAPTER 54

The Game's Afoot…in the mouth

Kirk's gaze darted back and forth, alert and suspicious, as he and Mitchell followed Harry, slowly making their way through the noisy crowd toward the V.I.P. poker table he'd noticed earlier when he and Spock first came in. To say he had trust issues with Harry Mudd was the understatement of understatements. The hair-brained scheme Harry had talked Gary into was stupid. Unfortunately stuck in the situation they had found themselves, stupid was the only thing on the table.

Spock, Ross, and Cain followed them from behind. Kirk's gaze fell on the table full of obnoxiously loud and intoxicated Klingon soldiers he'd noticed earlier. He could have killed them all right there for what they had done to the Farragut. But for now he had to let it go.

"This…is a really stupid idea," he said just loud enough, leaning just a little nearer and over Mitchell's left shoulder.

"Tell me something I don't know," Mitchell muttered without turning to look at him, knowing he didn't. "Just follow my lead like last time."

"Last time we ended up in jail."

"That wasn't my fault."

"You realize if this doesn't work—"

"It'll work."

"That's what you said—last time."

"No I didn't. I said it the time *before* last."

"Will you schoolgirls stop your bickering?" Harry chided them in a harsh whisper as they neared the V.I.P. section where he had stopped and was waiting. The employee immediately unhooked the deep burgundy velvet rope and stepped aside to allow them entry. "Wait at the top of the stairs until I introduce you."

"Don't make me regret not killing you tonight, Harry," Mitchell warned, looking him right in the eye as he passed in front of him and started up the stairs. Kirk glared at him as well, but didn't say anything as he followed Mitchell to the top of the steps and stepped to the side next to him.

Harry stared after them, then turned his attention to Spock and Cain. "Stay out of the way," Harry barked at all three of them. "Go wait back by the bar." He dropped his hand to let them pass—Cain peered at him through eyes narrow with suspicion before he followed Spock up the steps—but then suddenly threw his whole arm out in front of Ross to stop her again.

"What?" she calmly asked. Then he leveled his gaze on her, down, then back up. "I should have made you green," he said, his tone filled with regret. Then, as she stood there and stared at him, he reached to adjust a patch of material covering her left breast with a sigh. She flinched slightly until he was done with his adjustments. He took one last look at her and frowned. "Wait by the bar until you're called." he muttered.

Ross drew a deep breath and exhaled as she raised her foot to start up the steps, but then Harry suddenly grabbed her arm and pulled her back again. With his other hand he pushed an empty drink tray edge-on into her chest and held it there until she took hold of it with a curious expression on her face. "Go on already," Harry prompted again.

As she continued up the steps, Harry's eyes lingered on her. He shook his head, disappointed about something, then muttered something unintelligible under his breath before following after her up the steps to the V.I.P. section.

As Spock was about to pass by, Kirk turned and thrust *A Tale of Two Cities* into Spock's hands. "Hold onto this for me, will you?" he asked as the Vulcan had no option but to take hold of it, then carried it by his side as he walked over to the bar to join Cain and Ross.

As he waited for Harry to climb the stairs, Kirk surveyed the poker table.

Immediately catching his attention were two bodyguards, who stood strategically beside an extremely fat human wearing an exquisitely-tailored white dinner jacket—exquisite at least for these parts—who was seated at the poker table. The first bodyguard, an insect-like creature whose head was reminiscent of a common housefly, glared at him through dark sunglasses far too narrow for its large bulbous eyes. The other bodyguard was a husky, toothy reptilian, who also wore a suit and sunglasses. Whoever that fat human was, he was obviously the V.I.P.

Going around the back of the table clockwise, and standing between a well-dressed fat human on one side, and two rather seedy-looking humans on the other, was an Andorian card dealer, who was performing a rather extraordinary shuffling routine that was both graceful and precise. One of the two female sexes of her species—not that Kirk had ever been able to tell the difference between the two—she was tall and slender and not entirely unattractive for a sapphire-skinned, white-haired woman with antennae growing out of her head. She was wearing a variation of the same short-skirted uniform that all of the other non-waitressing female employees were wearing, but hers was a one-piece jumper with no pockets or sleeves that fastened all the way up to her throat.

He turned his attention back on the two seedy humans. Both looked uncultured and over-dressed in the way that only humans from Earth could understand. Looking a little like Dracula in pinstripes, the thin one had dark eyes peering out from beneath dark, hedgerow-like furrowed eyebrows, above a chiseled and perpetually frowning face that seemed to have found an unnatural equilibrium somewhere between anger and suspicion.

Dracula's companion, soft and chubby, albeit rather dimwitted-looking human, seemed to resonate a somewhat friendlier aura.

"Mister Walsh," the fat man suddenly greeted Harry in a loud, friendly voice, smiling with recognition as his eyes fell upon him.

"Mister Corrigus," Harry returned in like manner, taking a step forward and bowing slightly with respect. "Gentlemen," he added, nodding to each of Corrigus' friends briefly in turn before he straightened.

"Mister—Walsh?" Mitchell questioned just loud enough for Harry to hear, while hiding his mouth by pretending to scratch his face.

"*Leo* Walsh," he corrected firmly without looking back, hiding his sudden angst behind a faux smile, also pretending to scratch his face, then stepped forward toward his seated patrons."Gentlemen, do you all have everything you need here?" Without waiting for an answer he looked over at the bar and waved at Ross. "You! More drinks!" he demanded, then turned to the fat man and shrugged. "She's new."

"Well I for one will have an Andorian Ale!" Mitchell visibly shocked Harry by stepping past him to shove his hand toward the seated fat man to shake. The bodyguards quickly stepped up and brandished their pistols, while one of them grabbed Mitchell's forearm.

"No-no-no!" Harry quickly interceded, unclasping Mitchell's arm from the house-fly-like bodyguard. "These are friends of mine." Harry gave Mitchell a very annoyed and very brief sideways glare.

Responding to an almost imperceptible shift of Corrigus' eyes, the bodyguards withdrew and concealed their pistols once more.

"This is the gentleman I spoke to you about," Harry pointed out, gesturing toward Mitchell. "Allow me to introduce Mister…Mitchell," Then he nodded in Kirk's direction, and then toward the bar, "and his associates."

Corrigus raised his eyebrows. "A pleasure to meet you sir—a pleasure indeed," he said without standing or offering his hand in return. Then he glanced toward his bodyguards and added, "Please excuse them. Precaution is an unfortunate necessity of the times, I'm afraid."

"No—my bad. Sorry about the handshake thing," Mitchell stated affably. "My first time on Rectangula Two? I went to shake hands with this local and—well you know how they look with all their—" Mitchell waved with both hands simultaneously for emphasis. "I mean they look just like hands—anyway I grabbed the

wrong one, next thing I know this guy is on the ground rolling around and what-not. Hard to watch."

"Mitch?" Harry cut in, with a nervous smile on his face. "Maybe not so much detail?"

"No, it's quite alright," Corrigus smiled. "I've made a few cultural faux pas along the way myself. I can relate completely sir. Allow me introduce you to some business associates," Corrigus went on over politely as he gestured toward the two mobsters. Mitchell noticed a rather large but not gaudy ring on Corrigus' finger as he did so. It looked quite old—perhaps old enough to be considered a relic. "This is Mister Vin, and his associate. They are from Earth."

"Louie," the dim-looking informed Mitchell with a smile.

"What are we playing?" Mitchell asked, feigning ignorance.

"An honest game in a dishonest town. Poker," Corrigus announced grandly. "Five-card Stud to be precise. Do you play, my friend?"

"Poker. Been a while," Mitchell lied as he turned to Harry. "When was the last time we played poker—Leo?" He added extra emphasis on 'Leo."

"I'm sure I don't know, Mitch," Harry answered hesitantly, barely hiding his anxiety as he watched Mitchell immerse himself in his role.

Mitchell turned all of his attention back to Corrigus once more. "Actually my game of choice is Fizzbin," he told him. Then he gestured toward Kirk and asked, "Oh, may Mister Kirk join us?"

"Yes, of course," Corrigus answered, continuing his overly gracious display. "The more the merrier I always say. Yes sir, the more the merrier." Corrigus seemed to relish the charm of his own voice, often repeating himself.

Kirk wasn't quite so anxious to join in, but he stepped around behind Mitchell and took a seat in the empty chair between him and Corrigus. As he did so, he got a good look at Vin and his accomplice, Louie. Louie smiled while Vin simply glared silently.

"Well," Harry bellowed with overplayed satisfaction. "Things seem in good order. I'll leave you gentlemen—" He started to turn to move off, but Mitchell reached out and grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him down into the chair to his immediate left. "I'll just sit down and join you, if that's acceptable," Harry finished his sentence.

"Harry loves poker. Don't you, Harry? Didn't he tell you that?" Mitchell smiled.

"*Leo*—and I guess so," Harry shrugged and smiled.

"As you wish," Corrigus proclaimed with approval. He clearly loved an audience, and now he had a packed house.

"So my friend here—"

"*Leo*—" Harry mumbled through his hand as he put it to his mouth as if wiping it.

"*Leo*—here—passed along your interest to my employer about a certain artifact," Mitchell began. "You don't mind me bringing up business do you?"

"Not at all. Social situations are always a marriage of business and pleasure," Corrigus expounded, then grew serious. "An enigmatic one, your employer—with an equally enigmatic name—'the Spaniard.'"

"You have no idea," Mitchell enlightened.

"You work for the Spaniard?" Vin asked speaking for the first time, and without hiding any pretense of suspicion as he glared at Mitchell. His voice had a definitely perceptible old-school New York accent to it, and it didn't sound friendly. "I don't think I've ever heard of you."

"Well I've never heard of you either, Flynn," Mitchell said, continuing to brush him off dismissively.

"It's Vin," Dracula said calmly, slowly, and clearly, his dark eyes burning on Mitchell. "Vin. With a 'V.'"

Mitchell blew Vin off again by locking eyes with him just ever so briefly before turning to see Ross arrive at the other side of the table carrying a tray of drinks. She stopped between Vin and his fat partner—fat being a relative term at this table of course, as Corrigus was of far greater girth than Vin's partner.

Kirk knew right away, and Harry probably did as well, that Mitchell had mispronounced Vin's name on purpose, and both found they were looking at each other because they had turned to glare at Mitchell, who was seated between them. Kirk also recognized that certain tone in Mitchell's voice, and knew it potentially didn't bode well, but they were in the thick of it now and there was no turning back.

Ross started setting all the drinks down, one after another in a cluster in front of Vin. She had obviously never waited on tables in her life, and Harry could only shake his head in frustration. Mitchell on the other hand saw it as an opportunity. He slowly leaned to his left as covertly as he could and gazed across the table, but try as he might he still couldn't get a good look behind her loincloth.

Vin's sidekick apparently had a better view, though, as he happily stared at the bare hip right beside him for several seconds before he finally turned his gaze to Kirk and asked, "What about you? What's your story?"

"Me?" Kirk came back in an almost Spock-like monotone.

"Jimmy's from Iowa," Mitchell supplied helpfully as he abandoned his peeping efforts, at least for the time being, and sat up straight again. He locked eyes with Ross—but only for a moment as she quickly averted hers and walked back to the bar.

"A farm boy," the nameless mobster commented, following up with a cackling laugh that prolonged exposure to would no doubt prove to be very annoying.

"Hey, Flynn, you want to pass me my drink there?" Mitchell asked, looking at a particularly attractive glass filled with a brilliant sapphire-blue liquid—a drink very nearly the same color as the dealer's skin. "That tall blue one in front of the tall blue one there." Mitchell got a smile and a look from the Andorian dealer, following which he winked at her.

Vin stabbed his eyes at Mitchell. Then, after an uncomfortably long and premeditated pause, he reached into the cluster of drinks in front of him and pushed the one Mitchell had described ever so slightly toward the middle of the table. Mitchell reached for it, but Vin drew it back to an inch or so beyond Mitchell's reach. "Vin," he insisted. "You pronounce it *Vin*." Vin held on to the drink for a few moments longer, then finally withdrew his fingers from it.

Mitchell leaned to take it, leaned back again and took a sip, then set it down and completely ignored Vin.

"How come you're not drinking?" Fat Louie asked Kirk.

"Oh, Jimmy here doesn't drink," Mitchell interjected as he lifted his glass back to his lips to take another sip. By the time he finished, that sip had become a gulp. "Wow!" he bellowed, barely suppressing a cough and continued in a rather tortured gravely voice. "Now that—is *smooth*." He finished it off in one last gulp and held it up and tilted it at Ross, who had returned to her place behind the bar. "Skinny girl by the bar? I'll have another thank you very much!" He set it back on the table and turned just in time to meet Kirk's gaze, and his deadpan blank expression was clearly meant to convey a warning to his increasingly unruly friend. Harry, meanwhile, was beginning to stare off and slightly upward into the distance with a look of a dead man about to climb the steps of the gallows.

Cain watched Ross mechanically pick up the same amber bottle off the bar from which she'd poured before. She turned and headed back over to the poker table to refill his empty glass, walking around the stairs-side of the table and approaching Mitchell from his left in order to avoid having to walk past Corrigus and his bodyguards.

Mitchell slowly raised his glass up in his left hand for her, but didn't pay her any attention as he looked around the table. "I don't know—*Leo*—These guys look good. I think I'm going to need some more chips." Mitchell turned to Harry. "A *lot* more."

It took a moment for Harry to realize that Mitchell had spoken to him, as he was still busy staring off into oblivion. When he finally did realize it, he looked at him blankly.

"What was that?"

Mitchell's gaze lingered on Ross' firm backside as she walked back to the bar—he really wanted to know if she had anything on under those hanging flaps of hide—but as soon as she stepped behind it, he took a big gulp of his ale and turned back to Harry as if he already knew. "My usual."

"Your usual what?" Harry asked, lost.

"My usual hundred-thousand credits." He took another sip of his ale, which despite its fire seemed to taste a little better with every mouthful.

"A hundred-thousand?" Harry squeezed through gritted teeth, speaking at least two octaves higher than his normal tone of voice as his eyes threatened to burst from his head.

"*Argelius*," Mitchell announced loudly as he turned to Corrigus. "Did…*Leo*… here ever tell you about the time he and I were on Argelius?"

"*That!*" Harry interrupted quickly as he cleared his throat much louder than necessary, "…was one-hundred thousand, right, Mitch?" Then, without waiting for Mitchell to answer he waved to one of his nearby staff, who in turn waved over over two uniformed security employees who were guarding a hovering chip cart. When they reached the table, one of the guards pulled a pre-counted tray of circular black and purple chips and larger rectangular solid royal blue ones off of the cart and set down in front of Mitchell as his eyes once again drifted in Ross' direction.

"That skinny little bartender you got there Harry? She's a looker. You should make her green though."

"*Leo*," Harry quickly reminded him, once hiding his mouth behind his hand as though he were clearing his throat again and speaking as low as he could while being sure that Mitchell would hear him, then turned and smiled at Corrigus and shrugged. "Inside joke. He's the only one who calls me Harry."

"*And* your mother," Mitchell broke right in, giving Harry an almost friendly shove in the shoulder, one that was much harder than he was prepared for. "When

he was born? He had hair coming out of places that—well his mother took one look at him and named him Harry."

"Not true of course," Harry laughed nervously as he picked at his ear with his index finger.

Vin's fat sidekick suddenly broke into his annoying laugh again. Vin sneered and turned on him. "What the hell's so funny?" Vin snapped at him tersely.

"What? It's funny. Hairy. You know?"

"Oh you think so? Well you want to know what I think is funny?" Vin prefaced. "I'm going to take my chair and use it to wipe that stupid-ass grin off your stupid-ass face. How funny is that?"

The smile fell from his sidekick's face and he became despondent and sulked, burned into silence by Vin's glare.

"My friends, shall we play cards?" Corrigus was unused to not being the center of attention, but hid his discomfort gracefully.

Taking the cue, the dealer quickly shuffled the cards one more time, set the deck face-down on the table, and then slid it toward Corrigus to cut. Corrigus gestured dismissively, prompting her to pull the deck back and pick it up again.

"Gentlemen," she began as she glanced around at everyone, her eyes lingering on Mitchell for an extra moment or two, "the game is single-deck, five-card-stud. Nothing wild."

Mitchell quickly arranged his chips in front of him—not bad for someone who appeared to be well on his way to total inebriation—then selected one of the round black ones and tossed it into the center of the table with the chips from those other players who had decided to ante up. The dealer quickly gathered them into a single pile and then began to deal the cards, burning one under the small pile of chips at the end of each cycle until five cards had been dealt to each of the players.

Mitchell lifted just the near edges of his cards and gave them a quick glance before letting them back down, then raised his once again empty glass and fired off

an expectant look over toward Ross. She frowned at him for a moment after he set it back down, but then picked up the same bottle and walked over. Kirk watched this too and gave Mitchell a look, which Mitchell returned, then lifted his glass in his right hand and turned to meet Ross' eyes as he twisted to his left and held it up for her. She avoided his eyes and simply poured. Was she angry? At least she was expressing something. Then he dropped his eyes to stare at the bare skin of her gently curved hip— so soft and smooth. She finished refilling his glass and then walked away without saying a word, leaving him gazing after her longingly.

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," Corrigus announced as he arranged his cards on the table in front of him without looking at them.

"What's that Corey?" Mitchell asked in response as he turned back to him, thoroughly mystified by his pronouncement, and the strange echo that seemed to accompany it as it rattled inside his head.

"Your friend's book." Corrigus said as he nodded toward the bar. "I saw one of your assistants carrying it when you arrived. Benefits of a classical education." Corrigus suddenly started showing more interest in Kirk. "Though I must confess, sir, and with all respects to you and Mister Dickens, I find the end of that particular novel a bit of a downer and a long ways getting there. But to each his own, sir. To each his own."

Though he'd only had a short time to observe, one thing Kirk had determined about Corrigus was that he was not stupid. On the contrary, he was highly intelligent—and not a man who would easily be fooled by lies and half-truths fired off from the hip. So rather than bite at the bait and be drawn into a conversation with the man, he decided to simply nod cordially to him in response. Then he turned his troubled gaze back to Mitchell, who pretended not to see it.

"Back to your employer and a certain artifact in which I am interested," Corrigus said as Mitchell chugged down nearly half of his drink before setting it down hard and with flourish.

"The spear," Mitchell confirmed as he studied his glass for a moment.

"The spear," Corrigus confirmed in an epic, hushed tone, leaning forward for emphasis, dwelling on each syllable of those two special words. "I'll tell you plainly, sir—I want it. I have wanted and obtained a great many things over the years, having amassed and lost a wealth of several lifetimes in the process. However, there was always one thing has always eluded me—something I want very very much. Yes, sir, I have devoted the better part of my life to obtaining it—traveled the known and unknown galaxy in pursuit of it." Then he sat back, gestured dismissively, and continued with flourish. "The Ark of the Covenant…the Sword of Kahless…the Lirpa of Surak—myths! Fairy tales for children! Exaggerated whispers in the shadows—lost between the pages of history." Then he leaned forward again, "But the Spear!" He seemed on the verge of tears. "I want it, sir. Yes, I do."

"Well, my friend, then I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," Mitchell told him, stopping abruptly as he looked up from studying his empty glass, bringing another expression of horrified anxiety sweeping across Harry's sweating face.

Everyone at the table hung on Mitchell's words as he paused in silence for a few moments, then smiled at Corrigus.

"Because after tonight you're going to have to find something new to want." Gary raised his glass slightly in the air toward Corrigus. Corrigus finally smiled back at him and raised his own glass as well. Only then did Mitchell notice that his glass was empty and he frowned and set it down.

"You are an artist with words, sir—something I can appreciate." As Corrigus set his glass aside and lifted the corners of his cards as he asked, "In that case, can I assume that you found my terms satisfactory?"

"Quite satisfactory—although I think you're overpaying—," Mitchell started until he felt a swift kick under the table from Harry's shoe.

"Well, sir, when you want something as bad as I do, price is no issue."

"I don't know what you think you're pulling here," Vin suddenly rasped at Mitchell, "but I know every dealer in this sector and I've never even heard of you."

"Well, Flynn, that's probably because I don't usually deal locally in small-time operations." Mitchell let his gaze linger a bit longer on Vin this time before dismissing him and turning away "You have got to tell me what this stuff is, Harry!"

"Leo," Harry corrected him yet once again, his growing weariness at doing so evident in his tired tone of voice.

Vin suddenly slammed his hand on the table, rattling the everyone's glasses, and bolted up from his chair. "For the last time, my name is *Vin!* What, are you deaf? And tell me this? If the Spaniard has it, why the hell does she want to get rid of it? Huh?" Vin wasn't backing down.

"You'll have to ask her," Mitchell maintained his relentless eye contact with Vin as he lifted his glass and took a sip. "I can arrange a meeting if you like."

"You're full of shit!" Vin bolted up from his chair.

"Mister Vin, I must insist that you sit down and be civil," Corrigus politely, but firmly interjected. Behind him, his bodyguards tensed.

"You don't even know him!" Vin shouted as he spun once again on Corrigus, throwing out a finger pointed in Mitchell's face. "This clown just shows up here and starts telling spewing some bullshit story—and you believe him?"

Mitchell turned to look directly into Corrigus' eyes, ignoring Vin as if he weren't even there.

"Mister Walsh told my boss this was to be a private meeting." Mitchell said, then set his drink down. "I'm afraid I am going to have to say good evening."

Mitchell had gone all-in, and not a single hand of poker had even been played yet. He also realized that he was feeling a lot more of a buzz than he should have been after only two drinks. Or was it three? He sure hoped Harry actually had the damn spear because they needed to find out where Corrigus kept his ship, and the only way to do that was to actually go through with this sham of a deal.

He started to stand. Everything was just still moving in a downward direction when he heard Corrigus' voice.

"Please, sir, sit down. I offer my apologies. Let there be no more discussion about business." Then he turned to Vin, who was still standing as though about to lunge. "And mister Vin, I must insist that you also be seated, otherwise I shall be obliged to ask that you excuse yourself."

Apparently Corrigus was quite the heavyweight; so much so that Vin relented and sat back down, albeit slowly, and with such an incendiary expression on his face aimed at Mitchell, it was obvious the issue was far from settled.

Mitchell's fingers found the back of his chair and he sat down between Harry and Kirk, both of whom seemed barely able to control their anxiety.

"Much better." Corrigus smiled as he selected two cards from his hand and placed them face-down on the table. "Shall we continue?"

The dealer, showing some frazzled nerves herself, focused once again on the game. She withdrew the cards Corrigus had discarded and dealt him two new ones, then turned hesitantly to Vin and waited.

"What?" Vin asked sharply when he noticed the dealer looking at him.

"Cards, sir? How many would you like?"

"I don't want any," he rasped, laying his hand firmly over the cards he'd been dealt.

Over at the bar, Spock, Cain, and Ross continued to quietly observe.

Back at the table Mitchell took two chips from his stacks and tossed them into the middle of the table as though he had simply eaten a pistachio nut and was tossing aside the shells. Harry's eyebrows shot high into his forehead as he looked at the chips.

"Very bold, sir. Indeed very bold." Corrigus raised his eyebrows thoughtfully. "Since I have thus far observed you to be a straightforward man who speaks his mind, I must fold—with my compliments." Corrigus gracefully and slowly, with just his index and middle finger of his right hand, pulled his cards into a neat stack and slid them face-down toward the dealer, who slid them aside and looked expec-

tantly at Vin, who had the corners of his cards lifted slightly so he could see. Then he glared over at Mitchell, who all but ignored his stare.

"Call," Vin finally said, heavy with an undertone of hatred as he picked out and tossed two chips of his own in to match Mitchell's bet. "Two thousand."

"Gentlemen, please show your cards," the Andorian dealer directed.

Burning his glare on Mitchell, Vin picked up his cards and threw them back face-up.

"Three queens," the Andorian dealer indicated, then turned her attention to Mitchell.

Mitchell looked at Vin's cards for several long moments, then slowly took one of his face-down cards and turned it face-up. A two. He did the same with another card—another two. Then another. Three two's and two face-down cards showed. Mitchell set his hand down on the table next to them and looked directly into Vin's eyes. Then he lifted his hand again and turned over another card. Another two. Then Mitchell gestured, shrugged and smiled at Vin, who seethed silently.

"Four two's wins," the Andorian dealer spoke firmly and then drew the chips from the center of the table over to Mitchell, and then collected the cards.

Mitchell picked up two chips—half the pot and equal to Vin's bet—and with a wink at Vin, pushed them toward the Andorian dealer. "For you, sweetheart," Mitchell said as he patted the chips.

"Thank you, sir," she smiled as she picked up and put the two chips in her pocket.

Over at the bar, none of this escaped Cain's attention. He turned to Spock and Ross. "Stay sharp," he whispered to the both of them. "Things could get ugly."

CHAPTER 55

The Streets of Naska Starport

As Corba drove him up down the main snow-covered avenue for perhaps the fourth time, Prath's patience was all but spent. The raw sewage of political corruption was piled deeper than the snow along the streets. That damnable governor and his cronies ran this town—that was obvious. So much so, he was beginning to feel like a liberator, not an invader.

But he was done with this frozen wasteland of a city. It reminded him of stories he'd heard of Rura Penthé, which was beginning to sound like a garden spot by comparison. How he'd love to expedite his mission with a couple torpedoes from orbit.

"I do not understand why we must use the mind scanner," Corba commented as he rested his hand over the steering wheel and guided the armored vehicle through the snow squalls. "I prefer the old ways. They worked much better."

"Earthers are habitual liars," Prath imparted. "Physical torture rarely if ever works on them—something even they know themselves. They will tell you whatever you want to hear just to end the pain. They are spineless beings who respond only to one thing."

"What is that?"

"Money." Prath used the obscure Earth vernacular with the air of both wisdom and disdain.

"I do not understand."

"Financial incentive. Earthers are greedy creatures. Their only purpose in life seems to be the accumulation of wealth, and it is far more important to them than family and honor. Everything—and everyone—has a price…" Prath's' voice trailed off as his gaze lingered on something through the fogged up window.

"Stop!" Prath shouted suddenly as he shot his hand out and wiped a swath of the fog away.

Corba smashed his boot firmly down on the brake pedal, and the vehicle hurled to a quick halt. Prath stared into the swirling snowflakes that swirled in and out of the twin beams of the headlights. He pressed the control and opened his side window and stared into the icy wind.

"Where is the checkpoint that is supposed to be here?" he bellowed rhetorically.

"I do not know, Commander," Corba replied just in case it wasn't.

Fear suddenly swept Corba's face as Prath continued to glare out the window. He knew somebody was going to die soon—perhaps even him—when Prath decided who was at fault.

Prath's gaze shifted and fixed on the glowing rotating holographic sign reading...*Orion's Belt*.

CHAPTER 56

Brawlers in Arms

"Well, I gotta tell you," Mitchell announced as he tried to focus on the substantial pile of chips that he had amassed in front of him. "I've had my share of luck before, but never like this." He looked over at Harry and added, "I might just have to buy this place right out from under you…Harry."

Harry, already as white as a ghost, rolled his eyes and then bowed his head, looking as if he might actually be sick. He'd seen this kind of behavior from Mitch before. He knew full well not only that Mitchell had had at least one too many drinks, but also that he never could resist the temptation to over-indulge himself whenever he had a captive audience. This meant that he wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

Worst of all, as far as Harry was concerned, was the fact that he was totally helpless to intervene and put a stop to Mitch's games without risking blowing everything. He had no choice but to allow the chips fall where they may—literally.

Hesitant to bring it up, but realizing that he had to do something before things spiraled epically out of control—if they hadn't already and he was just in denial. "Hey uh…Mitch? You think maybe you've had enough to drink?"

"Not at all!" Mitchell shouted as he almost knocked over his empty glass when he grabbed for it, then lifted it up and gazed cross-eyed through it. "What is this stuff anyway, Harry?"

"This is bullshit!" Vin shouted as he slammed his cards down on the table and bolted to his feet again, stopping quickly but not sitting back down when he saw Corrigus' bodyguards tense.

Mitchell eyeballed Vin's cards, which seemed to be swimming on the green felt surface.

Corrigus calmly produced some sort of cigarette-like item from an ornate case he kept in his dinner jacket. The housefly bodyguard quickly stepped in and produced a lighter of some kind and held it to Corrigus' cigarette, which he held between his lips, puffing on it to catch the flame. "Mister Vin," he intoned, sounding like a parent about to correct a child. "In a game of chance there will be winners and there will be losers. Tonight it would seem that Mister Mitchell finds himself among the former." He lifted his glass toward Mitchell and smiled with approval, as if he were preparing to propose a toast. "You are quite the card player, Mister Mitchell," Corrigus said with cordial admiration. "Yes indeed, you most certainly are. My compliments. I like a man who isn't afraid to win. We are going to get along nicely, you and I."

"I ain't talking about the goddam cards!" Vin roared, drawing Corrigus' disapproving stare, which he returned right back at arguably the most powerful man at the table as he pointed a slender finger at Mitchell. "You don't even know this idiot!"

Corrigus took a long drag on his cigarette, then exhaled the smoke. "Mister Mitchell is an acquaintance of Mister Walsh. That is good enough for me." He turned his attention back to Mitchell again and said with a renewed smile, "And may I also say, sir, you have no tell. None whatsoever. Most impressive."

"Thank you," Mitchell nodded, which immediately caused the reality around him to swim. When he finally did manage to recover, he focused across the table at Vin and threw him an obviously insincere smile. "Maybe poker just isn't your game, Flynn. Perhaps Harry here can rustle up a Rock-paper-scissors game for you?"

Vin whipped out a pistol of some kind with lightning-quick speed and thrust it right at the center of Mitchell's face. "I've had all I'm gonna take from you, asshole!" he shouted. Corrigus calmy raised the first two fingers of his right hand—the hand holding his cigarette—just enough to stop his bodyguards, who'd stepped forward, their hands plunged deep beneath their jackets.

Kirk's first instinct upon seeing Vin's gun was to grab for it and wrench it away, but having also seen Corrigus so easily prevent the situation from escalating into an all-out firefight with the simple wave of two fingers, he held back. He just hoped that the man's clout alone was enough. He kept his eyes firmly glued on the pistol that Vin was still brandishing mere inches beyond his arm's reach—still aimed at Gary's face. Cain and Spock were too far off to help. It was up to him to act if the critical moment came.

"Mister Vin, you know my feelings on violence," Corrigus said and then took another drag on his cigarette. The irony that Corrigus had two heavily armed bodyguards ready to engage in just that didn't escape Kirk. If the situation had been less dangerous, it might even be funny. Unfortunately, things were rapidly deteriorating, thanks mostly to the fact that Gary was drunk and was acting like a jackass.

His eyes darted across the table to Vin's sidekick, who was sitting silently and very still as he stared fearfully at Corrigus' bodyguards. No threat there. He fixed his gaze on Vin's pistol.

Over at the bar, Cain bristled stiffly as he, Spock, and Ross continued to look on. As he braced himself on the bar, his hand brushed up on Kirk's book, laying on the bar beside his hand where Spock had set it earlier. He discretely slid his hand across the cover, briefly noting the title, then clenched his fingers firmly around the spine. A Tale of Two Cities. 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.' He had a distinct feeling things were trending toward the latter.

A swirling wisp of ghostly blue-white vapor rose slowly from the glowing tip of Corrigus' cigarette to join the tension that hung thick in the air around the table as everyone stood or sat frozen in silence and glanced around at each other.

Correction—almost everyone. Corrigus, it seemed, felt content to focus on the tip of his cigarette, which he continued to hold with surprising calmness. Or was he staring past it at Vin? Kirk couldn't tell for sure.

Harry's wide, fear-filled eyes remained glued to Vin's gun as he slowly lowered it to his side, apparently answering the question of where Corrigus was looking.

"Gentlemen," Corrigus called out, finally breaking the silence, his tone rising a decibel or more above its normal velvety pitch, "I believe the time has come to conclude this evening's social activities. While it has been…educational, frankly, I daresay events have taken a turn with which I am not comfortable."

"Perhaps you and Mister Mitchell would like to use my office to conclude your business negotiations?" Harry suggested, doing his best to salvage the deal.

"I think perhaps—" Corrigus started before Vin cut him off.

"You think I don't see right through this little scam?" Vin bellowed at Mitchell.

Mitchell's half-drunken grin and glassy-eyed gaze lingered blankly on Vin's fury-filled eyes. "You know what your problem is, my friend?" he asked, and then answered his own question. "Your problem is that you need to loosen up some. You know? I mean, your ass cheeks are just so…" He brought his hands up and pressed them tightly together.

"Aw no," a dismal Harry whispered to himself, knowing the end was near.

Just then a large-boned, hairy-knuckled, dark-skinned hand came down hard on Vin's shoulder. He spun around and found himself facing not one but five Klingon soldiers in varying stages of inebriation. The one in back was so unsteady on his feet, in fact, that when he finally made it to the top of the steps he lost his balance and tumbled over the railing.

The one who had grabbed his shoulder stepped right into his face, staggering slightly until he found his balance, and then barked, "You're not supposed to be carrying weapons, Earther!" showering him with spit as his words came out slurred and unnecessarily loud through an unkempt graveyard of large crooked gray and yellow teeth.

"Get the hell out of my face, you ugly swamp monkey!" Vin shouted right back at him, his eyes tearing from the rancid smell of the inebriated soldier's breath. Then, before the bear of a Klingon could react, Vin shoved him as hard as he could in the center of his body armor's breastplate, catching him by surprise and sending him staggering backwards, off balance, right into his comrades. Drunk as they were, they weren't able to react fast enough and hold their ground. Their feet

became entangled and they all lost their balance and stumbled backwards like a line of falling dominos, the one in back—a skinny rail of a soldier as Klingons went—spinning on one foot as he fell face-first all the way to the base of the steps. Mitchell noticed with a curious expression that he had a large section of the back of his trousers burned and scorched away.

A dark curtain of despair and dismay fell across Harry's face as he cupped it in his hands. The end of days would not happen on Earth despite all predictions otherwise. No, Armageddon would happen here, on a worthless, miserable ball of ice, thousands of light-years away at the ass-end of the known galaxy.

Corrigus' bodyguards reacted on their own, without prompting, subtle or otherwise, and by the time those four remaining Klingons managed to climb back to their feet and start to regroup, they'd rounded both sides of the table and were standing firm, ready to meet them head-on with whatever level of force might be necessary.

Kirk hurled himself from his chair, across the table and threw his hands out to grab Vin's pistol, hand and all, ramming his other elbow into the middle of Vin's face, striking the side of his narrow nose with a satisfying crack and the two tumbled together to the floor.

Corrigus' surly reptilian bodyguard reached out with one large ham hock hand and grabbed the lead Klingon's pistol as soon as it came up. He smashed both it and the hand that held it hard into his bushy-bearded face several times, over and over, knocking several of his teeth loose in the process before the Klingon finally let the weapon go as he staggered back and slammed into the table beside Vin's partner, who shot to his feet, cascading poker chips and drinks everywhere as he tried to sidestep the mess.

Harry wasted no time and shoved himself away from the table, hitting the second Klingon in the legs, who then spun him around to fall across his lap. Grunting with the pain of all that weight, Harry quickly rolled him off of his legs and let him fall senseless to the floor beneath the table with a resounding thud. He jumped to his feet to scramble off, but by that time the third Klingon had made his way forward and had taken up a position to block any escape from either direc-

tion. Seeing him, a frightened Harry jumped backwards and bumped into Corrigus' human-fly bodyguard, sending him backwards into Mitchell, who, despite his alcoholic daze, had risen to his feet amidst the bedlam, but then his eyes rolled back in his head and he blacked out and fell forward, face-first across the table.

The third Klingon charged and grabbed two handfuls of Harry's expensive shirt—but then the two oversized meaty hands of the reptilian bodyguard slammed onto the Klingon from behind, and for a moment the three struggling looked like a conga line before the Klingon tripped backwards over Mitchell's unconscious body sprawled on the table, and all three fell together like dominoes over the railing onto a table where several of his comrades had been sitting and cheering their side on. Their drinks flew into the air as the table broke in two under his weight, and one of them fell out of his chair.

Back up top, the fourth Klingon grabbed Vin's partner by the back of the neck, yanked him backwards, and threw him down the stairs, then clumsily raised his pistol toward Kirk, but before he could steady himself enough to shoot, Cain hurled Kirk's book through the air like a boomerang, its pages fluttering loudly before hitting the Klingon square in the wrist. His pistol flew out of his hand and went off by itself when it landed in the center of the table, burning a long flaming gash into the green felt surface, missing Corrigus by the narrowest of margins, who had been busy trying to squeeze his fat ass out from behind where he had been sitting.

Every Klingon warrior at every surrounding table rose to their feet, ready to tangle ass, and it only took a few seconds for an all-out brawl to erupt.

"Come on!" Cain called to Spock, and Ross, and they rushed forward and leapt into the mêlée.

Corrigus, helped along by his massive reptilian bodyguard, shoved their way to the steps and down. The human-fly fell quickly into step behind them as they hustled off.

Harry climbed to his feet just in time to witness their get-away, and scrambled after them through the path they were clearing ahead.

As Kirk and Vin's partner wrenched at each other's shirts, Cain quickly collared Vin, who had recovered his pistol and was rising to his feet behind Kirk. He spun Vin around and with a couple of quick blows knocked the pistol from his hand, then sent him tumbling into Spock, who quickly neck-pinched him unconscious and shoved him over the railing onto another table to be swallowed up in the brawl below. Ross rushed around the back of the table to get to Mitchell, who was still unconscious with his lips pressed into his own drool on the green felt of the table.

"We've got to go now!" Cain yelled to Kirk, then caught sight of Harry scrambling away. He bolted after and collared Harry, yanking him to a halt just as he reached the bottom. "Where's the back door?" Under the burn of Cain's angry glare, Harry pointed toward the back of the casino, where Corrigus and his thugs were plowing their way through the chaos at that very moment. "Let go of that idiot and come on!" Cain admonished Kirk as he struggled with Vin's fat sidekick Louie. Kirk, seeing terror in Louie's wide-eyed stupid stare, simply let him go, following which he turned and started climbing over the railing.

Kirk hurried over to help Ross manhandle the unconscious Mitchell. They each wrapped one of his arms around their shoulders and carried him between them, his feet dragging under his dead weight as they made their way toward Cain and Harry. Then, with Harry in the lead and Cain holding him firmly by the collar, the entire group quickly made their way down the steps and pushed and shoved their way through the brawling, drunken chaos of arms and legs, fists and feet, and flying chairs.

CHAPTER 57

Stella's Got A Gun

Kirk never saw it coming, but as soon as he had stepped out into the alley he heard Ross yelp and felt Gary being yanked away from him, and before he had a chance to look and see who was responsible, let alone to do anything about it, he felt himself being hoisted up into the most massive bear-hug he'd ever experienced, and thrown through the icy winter air. He slammed back-first into a cold, hard metal surface. His breath rushed from his lungs to form a vapor cloud that dispersed before his eyes before everything went black.

He was freezing. He was shivering so hard and couldn't stop. When he opened his eyes, everything was a dark cold blur. He drew a breath into his collapsed lungs with a gasp. It felt like icy daggers in his chest. His face was wet with fallen snowflakes that had melted. He could see his own cloud of breath billow against the black backdrop of what had to be the night sky, and snowflakes continued to fall toward him, reminding him of stars at warp.

He raised his head, which felt ten times heavier than usual, shook off the blur and struggled to sit up. When his eyes finally focused, he found himself staring up at the human-fly bodyguard and the front side panel of a hovering black limousine. He looked around and quickly realized that a lot had happened during his blackout. The reptilian thug was holding Cain, Spock, Ross, and Harry off to one side at gunpoint. Half-covered in snow, he could see that they hadn't given up without a fight. Gary, on the other hand, was face-down in the snow just inches from his foot.

There was someone new there now, too—or rather…some thing—standing beside the limousine driver's door, leveling a large weapon. Lobster-man was the

only thought that came to mind, what, with its multi-jointed outer shell covered in dark splotches and beady little black eyes on the ends of short stalks that protruded from beneath its heavy brow ridge.

He looked back at Ross, standing with her arms folded tightly across her chest in a futile struggle to keep warm, creating the illusion that she was completely naked from the waist up. How she managed to be coping as the chilly wind whipped through the alley, blowing stinging needless of icy dust against her bare skin, was a mystery to solve another time.

The sound of an automatic window being lowered drew his attention back to the limousine. Sitting in the spacious and obviously quite luxurious rear passenger compartment, wearing a very expensive-looking heavy coat with a fur-lined collar, and smiling with his disingenuous smile of superiority, his gaze was fixed somewhere out into the cold winter night as he calmly smoked his skinny cigarette. "Sir, I must insist, since Mister Mitchell is presently indisposed, that you give me what I came here for."

"Good luck with that," Kirk said before he knew it.

On cue, the man-fly reached down and grabbed Kirk, yanked him to his feet, and shoved him hard against the side of the limousine, pressing his cheek on the cold metal right next to Corrigus' open window. Then he drew his pistol and practically shoved the muzzle up Kirk's nose.

"Tell the bug to get the gun out of my face and we'll talk," Kirk rasped, his breath puffing in condensed clouds as he gazed at his dual reflections in the man-fly's dark sunglass lenses, which fogged up and then quickly cleared with each word. No, that wouldn't do at all apparently, a fact to which the man-fly immediately enlightened him with a sudden punch to his gut.

Fortunately, the combination of bitter cold and adrenaline coursing through his veins enabled him to absorb the blow without completely doubling over.

"Please, don't be difficult, sir," Corrigus said without sounding at all like he was pleading. Gone was his charm, Kirk noted. His tone had taken on a timbre of in-

difference that matched the frigid night air. "It's been far too exhausting of an evening and I simply wish to conclude our business."

"Ask *him*," Kirk came right back, shifted his gaze to Harry. "This is *his* show."

"Uhh…just a moment—" Harry began stuttering, breaking in as he took a quick step forward before the reptilian thug stopped him with a single beefy hand to his chest, which shut him up.

A blinding, bright blue-white bolt of energy suddenly flashed in out of the darkness and struck the bug squarely in the torso. It collapsed instantly and dropped its weapon harmlessly to the snow-covered ground.

Then another bolt lashed the crustacean in the upper torso. It appeared to stun the creature for the moment, but seemed also to disperse harmlessly across its carapace. A third shot took out the reptilian, and a quick fourth finally dropped the crustacean before it could shake off the effects of the first hit.

Kirk dove forward and grabbed the man-fly's pistol out of the snow, then rolled to his feet and thrust it in through the open window and pressed it hard against Corrigus' left temple. "Get out now," he tersely ordered the fat man, who responded with indifference and did nothing at all as Cain and Spock retrieved the other felled goons' weapons.

"Stella, my beauty!" Harry cried out gleefully into the darkness.

Stepping out from the shadows into the headlights of Corrigus' hovering limousine, a tall and statuesque woman wearing a long heavy winter coat leveled a formidable-looking sidearm which she held in both hands. "Shut up Harry," rasped Stella's gravely voice as she lowered the weapon.

Kirk reached in through the window with his free hand and pressed the door control, then stepped aside and waited while the door lifted outward and slid back. He waited for a moment as Corrigus silently regarded him, then quickly moved back in and grabbed the portly man by the front of his coat. "Right now, Mister Corrigus."

To his mild surprise, Corrigus complied without any further posturing. Kirk took a chance and glanced around briefly while the fat man struggled to climb out, then helped him to his feet, pinned him back against the door, and shoved his pistol deep into the furry softness of Corrigus' coat. "Your coat. Take it off."

After a moment's hesitation, Corrigus slowly unfastened his coat, pulled it off, and held it out to Kirk. "Well played, sir," he calmly said. "Yes, very well played. But of course, you realize you are a dead man?" He might not have known who Kirk really was, but it was clear that he knew he was somebody other than who he had been pretending to be.

"Get in line. People have been trying to kill me for the last two days," Kirk blew him off as he took his coat.

Kirk looked to find Cain standing behind his right shoulder, and turned Corrigus over to him with a shove. Then he turned and raised his voice to get his half-frozen officers' attention. "Ross." As soon as she met his gaze he tossed Corrigus' coat to her, and she quickly pulled it on. It was of course much too large for her, but she wrapped herself in it as though it were a cocoon, leaving only her feet and face visible.

Satisfied that Ross would be all right for a few more minutes, Kirk turned his attention to Stella, the woman who had rescued them. She was not altogether unattractive, but she seemed to have something between a scowl and resign permanently engraved on her face.

"Thank you," Kirk offered, smiling at her as Harry stepped in to introduce her.

"Whatever."

"Kirk, my Stella," Harry presented her with a broad smile on his face.

But Stella disregarded Kirk completely and turned on Harry. "What the hell, Harry?" she demanded, her raspy voice piercing as the air was cold and biting. "You said we were leaving two hours ago!"

"Uh—Yes—well—" Harry began, suddenly unnerved by this information being revealed.

"Oh shut up!" she shouted as she finally lowered her pistol to her side. "I don't want to hear any more bullshit excuses from you."

Harry smiled sheepishly at Kirk. "She loves me."

"Shut up, Harry." Kirk echoed Stella's frustration before turning away and walking over to help Spock and Ross lift the still unconscious Mitchell up off of the ground and carry him over to the limousine. As they maneuvered him inside, Cain pushed Corrigus out of the way, manhandling a little more than was necessary, perhaps, and held him at gunpoint against the alley wall.

"We need to go now, Jimmy," Cain urgently suggested.

Kirk put a firm hand on Harry's shoulder and said, "In the car." Harry opened his mouth as if to protest, but Kirk shut him up. "Don't make me throw you in."

"Fine," he capitulated, then turned to Stella with a smile. "I'll be back shortly, my sweet."

"What are the chances?" She intoned sarcastically as Harry's smile faded and he turned to the limousine and climbed inside.

Kirk glanced briefly over at Corrigus as Cain backed away from him to join the others in the limousine, just to make sure that he felt content to stand there and do nothing but shiver—or if not content, then at least smart enough—then turned his attention back to Stella, catching her gaze as he stepped forward with a smile.

"What?" she snapped indifferently.

"Can you do me a big favor?" he asked her, holding his smile and trying a little charm on her, despite her cold indifference. He pointed at Corrigus. "Can you keep him here for ten minutes. Can you do that for us?"

"Whatever," Stella answered, briefly waving her pistol off to one side as she threw off any semblance of caring very much, one way or the other. Then she aimed it at Corrigus with a huge sigh, apparently having decided to grant Kirk's request—or for her own safety.

"Thanks," Kirk said, smiled, then turned to walk toward the limousine, stopped, turned back to her. "What are you doing with him? He's a real asshole."

"Tell me something I *don't* know," Stella said with resign.

Kirk looked at her for a couple more seconds, smiled, then turned and continued over to the limousine where he opened the driver's door, and climbed into the seat.

He smiled one last time as he closed the door, then turned his attention to the steering wheel and dashboard controls—they looked pretty standard—and noted that Spock had taken the seat beside him in the front.

Harry poked his head out through the window and smiled broadly at Stella. "See you shortly my sweet!" he shouted.

"Go to hell, Harry!"

"She loves me," Harry repeated as he faced inside and the window began to close.

"Evidently," Spock remarked from the darkness right before the window shut tight.

The hovering limousine lurched forward suddenly, throwing Harry back from the window into the shadows, and sped down the alley.

Corrigus decided to take advantage of Stella's momentary distraction and started moving toward her, but she turned back to him and raised her pistol, aiming it straight at his face. "One more step and I swear I'll blow the ugly off you!"

CHAPTER 58

Another Junk Heap

"Klingons behind us!" Cain warned from his place in the back seat, where he'd just started keeping an eye out for anyone who might be following them.

"I'm so dead," Harry commented, sounding almost as if he was ready to accept that fate. "I'm dead, and I'm finished."

"Somebody better tell me where I'm going," Kirk yelled at nobody in particular. Like Gary, he had been to Naska before, but Gary was still unconscious and he wasn't nearly as familiar with the city as Gary was.

As they blew through the intersection with the second cross-street they'd passed, a Klingon troop truck rounded the corner and joined in the chase. "More now!" Cain amended.

"Harry!" Kirk shouted.

"What?!" Harry yelped.

"Directions!"

Harry leaned forward to look through the small window in the semi-transparent partition and out through the windshield. "Next big intersection take a left, and then a hard right onto the first side street."

"Hold on!" Kirk shouted as they quickly approached that intersection. He threw the vehicle into the left turn just as Harry had directed—Mitchell fell against the right side door and struck his head against the window—and then followed with the hard right—Mitchell slid up straight and nearly fell across Ross' lap.

"I'm going to die," Harry mumbled in a resigned tone of finality.

Something pinged loudly off the top of the back window, drawing everyone's attention. Even Kirk, when he saw Spock turn and look back, glanced at the rear-view monitor to see if he could see what it was. At that moment, a second shot struck near the center of the window and ricocheted away, cracking it across its width.

"They're shooting at us!" Harry exclaimed as he shimmied down in his seat until his head was below back window level.

"You think?" Cain shouted at Harry before turning his attention forward. "It's a foregone conclusion that they know I'm here."

"Car!" Harry suddenly screamed, pointing wide-eyed toward the left side window.

Another limo that looked nearly identical to their own raced through the intersection in front of them. Kirk yanked the steering wheel and swerved to avoid it.

Ross and Spock watched as the entire contingent of vehicles pursuing them followed the other limousine, then locked gazes with each other.

"Unexpected," Ross looked at Spock.

"Most curious," Spock responded.

"Take the next left," Harry interjected as he pointed ahead.

The limousine lurched hard as it turned and sped down a dark side street. Mitchell's head smacked the window again. This time he woke up. Prying his eyes open with great difficulty, the first thing he saw, looming large and a little blurry right there in front of him, was Harry's perturbed face glaring back at him.

"This is your fault," Harry shouted at him.

Another lurch. Mitchell finally realized he was in a vehicle. He brought his legs around in front of him and sat up, then looked around to discover that he was sharing the rear compartment with Ross, Cain, and Harry as the outside spun past in a painful blur of strobing light and dark.

"What the hell?" he asked. He blinked his eyes repeatedly, trying to shake off his stupor, and threw a hand out to brace himself against the side of the bouncing vehicle. He turned his eyes on Ross and noticed that she'd found a coat somewhere and pulled it on over that skimpy outfit Harry had given her. "And what the hell was that blue crap you gave me?" he snapped loudly at her.

"Romulan Ale," Spock offered helpfully from the front seat.

"Romulan Ale?!" Mitchell shouted, causing his head to throb. "You gave me *Romulan Ale?* How much did I have?"

"My guess? All of it." Harry shot at him.

Mitchell winced and rubbed at his skull, trying to massage away the throbbing pain. "What's *that* idiot still doing here?"

"You're welcome," Harry announced, affronted.

Mitchell noticed Ross. "And I had the situation completely under control thank you very much."

"Clearly," Ross said, drawing a retaliatory glare from him.

"Harry talk to me!" Kirk yelled from the front. "Where am I going?"

"Take the next right and just keep going," Harry yelled forward through the partition, "then right again at pier fifty-seven!"

"Please…stop…yelling!" Mitchell pleaded as he raised his hand in front of the two daggers stabbed in his eye sockets.

Kirk hooked left and immediately recognized the industrial area that the lonely road started leading them through. It extended ahead along the length of the flat mountaintops on the outskirts of the city proper. It was the same area where he and Spock had landed and then abandoned their Romulan junk-heap—and wisely so, since not long afterwards that squad of Klingon soldiers had arrived to question them. Fortunately, Spock's encore performance as a Romulan merchant was a critical success.

After that, strangely enough, there didn't seem to be any signs of Klingon military presence at all—at least not in the warehouse district that bordered the merchant end of the spaceport. The skies above were noticeably deserted as well, which made him begin to worry The contingent of warships that had been in orbit when he and Spock flew in had been a formidable one. He could only assume that more ships had since arrived.

Something that had been nagging at him for some time suddenly became clear. No one, him included, had given voice to any sort of escape plan. Granted, the rapid momentum of survival and escape had not left them much time for contemplation, but now that their escape was imminent, hopefully, they needed to come up with something.

"There," Harry jabbed his finger through the partition, nearly grazing Kirk's ear. "Big building on the right."

Kirk squinted at the building to which Harry was pointing. Pier-57 wasn't a pier at all, of course. It hadn't been built on the sandy shores of some seaside city. It appeared to be a completely enclosed, long, rectangular structure, three or four stories tall, with no windows—certainly not very impressive from an architectural standpoint. In fact, the only means of access appeared to be a small and unremarkable door.

He let off the accelerator and slowed the limousine to a standstill hover near the door, and everyone poured out of the limousine. Kirk walked around and glared at Mitchell, who stood stood gazing up at the top of the building. "Feeling better?" he asked, his tone short and reeking of sarcasm.

"I'm fine, thank you very much," Mitchell turned to lock eyes with him and snapped back just as curtly. He recognized Kirk's tone. He knew it all too well, having heard it so many times through the years every time his best friend was upset with him. And with that, he strode off around the front of the limousine and approached Harry, who was already standing in front of the lonely door, tinkering with something he held half hidden in his hand. He looked up through the falling snow at the blank wall rising high into the night sky, and then back down at Harry, who as far as he was concerned was taking too long.

"Any day," he snapped, then added for emphasis, "Leo."

"Patience is a virtue," Harry shot back as he tapped the device's buttons with hids fingers some more.

"Yeah, you're going to *be* a patient." Mitchell was in no mood, and the fact that his eye sockets throbbed painfully in the brisk chill wasn't helping. What was it McCoy had said to Jim once after a particularly memorable binge back during their academy days? 'Your eyes look like two piss-holes in the snow.' While he'd never had a problem imagining what two piss-holes in the snow looked like, he now knew what they felt like as well—burning and freezing all at the same time.

His memories were interrupted by a particularly large snowflake that landed on the end of his nose, then quickly melted.

Harry pressed his hand to a section of the wall just to the right of the door. A square of blue-green light suddenly glowed beneath it and a several crisscrossing brighter narrow scanning beams swept in all directions beneath his hand several times. Expecting the door to either open or make some sort of sound in response, Mitchell turned his eyes to it, but it didn't do either. Instead, a much larger and wider section of the curved wall a short distance away lit up in the same bright blue-green color and then faded out of existence to reveal an open doorway set beneath a recessed arch.

"Same old Harry," Mitchell noted mentally with a shake of his head and a smile, which quickly fell away when the agony that came from his brain trying to escape from his skull finally hit him. He raised his hands to his head and massaged his temples. "Do not shake your head," he also noted. Even the sound of his own thoughts seemed too loud.

Harry left him and strode beneath the arch into the darkness and out of sight.

Spock raised his eyebrow curiously as everyone seemed hesitant to be the first to follow.

Mitchell glanced at Kirk, then took off through the archway. Kirk followed, then Cain, Spock, and lastly Ross, who turned and looked back as soon as she stepped inside. That same blue-green luminescence suddenly surrounded her, and

all that was left when it faded was the same bare wall that had been there when they arrived.

Walking behind Harry in the darkness, Mitchell spotted a bright rectangle of light coming from another doorway at the end of the narrow corridor, and by the time he passed through that doorway moments later, his alcoholic haze had finally begun to wear off and he found himself looking at nothing but a big empty service hanger. Cain, Ross and Kirk stepped up behind them and spread out as they, too, stared at a lot of nothing in the middle of the hangar.

"What are we doing here Harry?" Mitchell asked as he ran his fingers back through his hair.

Harry turned and frowned at Mitchell. "Go back to sleep, huh?" he replied. He fingered the small device in his hand some more, then took a couple of steps forward, raised the device out in front of his face, and pressed a button. A small, greenish, translucent holographic representation of an impressive and sleek forward-swept-wing spacecraft coalesced and floated above the device.

Then a real spacecraft—a full-sized version of Harry's little holograph—suddenly appeared out of thin air in the middle of the hanger. A sleek vessel of extraordinary grace and beauty, its forward-swept wings spanned outward and tapered, like arms reaching to embrace—or capture. Harry turned and looked down his nose at Mitchell as though he were waiting for approval, or perhaps even an apology. He got none.

"Fascinating," Spock said, his voice breaking the silence that had filled the cavernous hanger. "The Excalibur One."

"The what?" Kirk asked, turning to the Vulcan.

"The Excalibur One," Ross chimed in helpfully. "The winner of the last Rigel Invitational. Finished the race in record time, defeating all other contenders by such a large margin that even Starfleet took an interest."

"Still despise me?" Harry asked, trying once more to gain Mitchell's approval.

"If I gave you any thought at all I probably would," Mitchell shot back indifferently.

"Casablanca. Scene sixteen," Spock remarked matter-of-factly. Then, seeing everyone's vacant expressions, he elaborated. "A motion picture produced by Warner Brothers on Earth in nineteen forty-two." Then he turned his eyes to Harry. "However, if memory serves, the Excalibur One vanished without a trace shortly after the race. She was officially listed as presumed lost in space—either destroyed or caught in a wormhole."

Harry rolled his eyes in disbelief. "Oh come on! Seriously? Do you think if I had the real Excalibur One I'd really just let you walk in and take it?" He glared at them all, and then shook his head as he turned back toward the ship. He tapped another control on his palm device and the ship rippled oddly, then morphed into a similarly sized but much older looking Klingon bird of prey, its metal surfaces well-worn and micrometeorite–pitted, its insignia faded to near absence.

"*This* just got better," Mitchell smirked.

"Fully implemented quantum camouflage imager technology," Spock was impressed, obviously far more intrigued by the technology than with the fact that the vessel was a Klingon ship—probably a stolen Klingon ship knowing Harry—and not the legendary racing ship.

Harry's face suddenly broadened with a smile. "I know, right?"

"How did you overcome the tachyon radiation emissions?" Spock asked him.

"The who-what?" Harry bounced back with a blank stare, then caught Mitchell shaking his head. "What? You think I'm going to just go flying around in a Klingon ship?"

"You mean a stolen Klingon ship?" Mitchell corrected him as Spock took out his tricorder and started scanning the ship.

"I didn't steal it, someone else did," Harry exclaimed in his own defense. "I won it fair and square from them!" He pushed past Mitchell and Spock and

walked impatiently up the access ramp, muttering to himself all the way, until he finally disappeared inside.

The irony suddenly dawned on Kirk. He'd arrived in an old Romulan junk heap and was preparing to leave in an old Klingon junk heap.

"Is that idiot coming with us?" Cain asked as he stepped up beside Mitchell.

"How the hell do I know?" Mitchell asked. When Cain didn't answer he blew him off and stalked off after Harry, up the ramp and into the ship. "Harry!"

Kirk watched Gary go, then noticed that Ross and Spock still seemed oddly captivated by the old Klingon vessel as they gazed at it in silence. "You two go on in and help get this thing ready to go," he told them.

"Aye, skipper," Ross responded quickly, already on her way up the ramp before she even finished speaking. Spock followed.

"How the hell do you even know that asshole?" Cain asked Kirk as he turned to him.

"Long story," he answered as he watched the Vulcan disappear into the vessel. "He's actually not so bad."

"Not *that* idiot—the *other* idiot," Cain shook his head.

"Harry? Longer story. One I'd just as soon forget."

Just inside the airlock, Mitchell stepped off the ramp and found himself in the spartan confines of the undersized cargo hold where he spotted Harry shoving several shipping containers to one side or the other, burrowing his way toward the wall in front of which they'd been stacked. Ross and Spock each gave him a curious look as they passed behind him on their way up the narrow access corridor, but he paid them no attention.

"So when were you going to tell me?" he snapped at Harry, not caring whether Ross and Spock overheard him or not.

"Tell you what?" Harry asked with about the same amount of concern as he struggled to push the particularly heavy-looking final container aside to reveal a

small access panel in the wall. He worked his fingers along one edge until he finally pried it loose, then removed it and handed it off to Mitchell, who tossed it aside onto the top of one of the containers.

"That you were lying?" Mitchell exclaimed. Who did Harry think he was, anyway, handing the panel cover off to him like he was some kind of unskilled helper? He was lucky he didn't get that panel right back, over the crown of his head.

"What would be the point of lying?" Harry smiled as he reached into the dark space behind the bulkhead, obviously having found whatever it was he was looking for. He withdrew a dark cloth bag and blew off a thin layer of dust, then loosed the chord around its top and slid it off to reveal an oblong, shallow, ornately-textured black box about the length of his forearm. It didn't look like anything special beyond its potential value as a several-centuries-old relic with worn and tarnished brass hinges and latch that might have been original fixtures, but when Harry flipped the latch and carefully lifted the lid, then turned the box around for him to see, the object sitting snugly inside the plush navy-blue velvet lining seemed almost to call to him. He reached for it, but Harry wasn't having any part of that.

"No!" Harry barked as he quickly snatched it away. He glared at Mitchell for a moment, then slowly moved it back toward Mitchell so that he could look at it again. "Look. Don't touch," he admonished.

"Don't push it, Harry," Mitchell rasped, then he looked. The artifact wasn't what he'd expected—not that he'd envisioned anything specific. At first glance it looked like a typical ancient spearhead crafted from a common metal that had tarnished to a dark gray over the millennia since its creation. But something bright and shiny quickly caught his attention. A thin, brilliant gold foil sleeve wrapped the middle of the spearhead. Clearly inlaid into the center of that sleeve were the words 'Lancea et clavus Domini'. Mitchell had seen plenty of fakes over the years, most of them fabricated by Harry's most notorious criminal contacts, but this one had a certain something about it that begged closer inspection. Either it was the best fake he'd ever seen, or perhaps…just perhaps…

"I know, right?" Harry said, smiling proudly.

"Is it real?" Mitchell snapped dismissively, remembering that the junk heap of a vessel he was standing in had only moments ago appeared to be the *Excalibur One*.

"Do *you* think it's real?" Harry countered, locking his eyes onto Mitchell's expectantly.

Mitchell sighed.

"Oh for God's sake, of course it's real, Mitch!" Harry finally answered. "Do you really think so little of me?" He paused for a moment, but then thought better of it. "I don't have time for this." He slammed the box shut and quickly slipped it back into the soft cloth bag, then pushed past Mitchell and headed back toward the aft airlock.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Mitchell called after him.

"Not with you, that's for damn sure."

"You're not?" Mitchell's confused tone couldn't seem to commit to disappointment or relief.

"Seriously?" Harry shot back with a most unnerving chuckle. "I have to get back and clean up the mess you made—thank you very much, by the way."

"You really made a deal with that guy?"

"Of course I did. And if I don't get this to him, I'm a dead man."

"You're going to just give it up? After all that time looking for it?"

Harry paused for a moment, turned back. "I don't have to." Harry stepped forward. "Come on, Mitch. You want to die with these idiots? Let's you and me—" Harry brandished the artifact box. "Let's blow this town. Just like old times. What do you say?"

Mitchell looked as though he just might be considering just that, but then shook his head. "Sorry."

"Well it's been nice knowing you," Harry half-smiled, then gazed nostalgically at the bag in his hand. "We could have been great, Mitch, you and I," he remarked. "You know?"

Mitchell just stared back at him indifferently and didn't say anything—not that Harry had expected him to.

"See you around the galaxy," were his last words to Gary as he turned and crossed past the ramp airlock where he ran smack into Kirk and Cain on their way in.

"You'll need this." Harry shoved the small hand-held device that he'd used to operate the stealth field against Kirk's chest and held it there until Kirk took hold of it. Then he stepped around the two men and continued to the nearby wall, into which had been built a single-passenger transporter unit. "And I'd get rid of that car, too, if I were you!"

Harry pressed a control on the wall, and cascaded into a stream of shimmering energy.

Cain watched as Harry's last atoms sparkled into nothingness, then frowned at Kirk and said, "He's probably right about the car, though."

"I'll take care of it." Kirk turned and headed back out through the airlock and down the gangway. "Get this piece of junk ready for take-off!"

Cain turned his gaze briefly on Mitchell, who simply shook his head and then headed forward, deeper into the ship where Spock and Ross had gone. Cain glanced around at the various cargo containers with suspicion—God only knew what might have had in them.

The large armored doors at the end of the accessway slid aside to reveal a rather cramped bridge. Mitchell stepped through to find Ross seated at what on a Starfleet bridge would have been the helm, carefully adjusting a number of the instruments.

"You *can* fly this thing, right?" he asked her after an uncomfortably long silence—a result of her coat having fallen away from her leg and his having been captivated by it.

"The flight instrumentation is standard," she answered, "but several of the control interfaces have been modified with equipment with which I am unfamiliar."

Spock said nothing as he stepped up and seated himself in the adjacent seat on the navigation side of the raised station, then began to tinker with the instrumentation.

"I believe it is possible to route the console OS through the universal translator," Ross speculated.

"Indeed," Spock nodded approvingly at her, then adjusted one particular control.

Mitchell stepped back to the command chair and examined the unfamiliar controls, trying to fathom some sense of their purpose. Fortunately, he'd never been inside a Klingon military vessel before. He focused his gaze on Ross and Spock as they chattered on in monotone. "Yeah…can one of you turn on the front viewport?" He finally broke in.

Almost before he could finish asking, the forward window depolarized to transparent and a view of the inside of the hanger coalesced beyond it.

"Someone is going to have to operate the overhead bay doors," Ross pointed out, her voice interrupting his thoughts as she turned around and faced him.

"You talking to me?" Mitchell asked. "Can't you do that from in here?"

"No," Spock offered so briefly as to cause him to double-take. Fortunately he elaborated as expected. "There seems to be no onboard access—at least none that I can locate. Most likely an oversight or an obtuse security measure."

Mitchell suddenly realized that the both of them were gazing at him expectantly, as though he had just fallen into the roll of ad hoc captain.

"'No' would have been just fine," he said to the Vulcan, then fell into silent thought.

"Well their not my doors—just blow through them," he quickly blurted out, wishing as soon as it came out that he could take the silly idea back.

Spock's right eyebrow climbed halfway to his bangs. "They are made of a solid duranium," he pointed out, his voice rising slightly above his usual monotone. "Also, this ship is not equipped with weapons," Spock added.

"What?" Mitchell's eyes widened.

"This vessel appears to have been designed specifically for speed and stealth. The imaging system draws power directly from the warp core, and it takes up all of the space normally reserved for weapons. It is quite extensive."

"Are you serious?"

Spock's eyebrow—his left one this time—rose toward his bangs once more.

"You're saying we have no weapons?"

"I am."

Mitchell propped his elbow on the arm of the command chair and threw his hand to his forehead. The fact that Spock apparently didn't share his sense of anxiety over this fact was beginning to irritate him to no end.

"The hanger controls are most likely in that office," Spock offered helpfully.

"I got it," Cain broke in impatiently as he spun away and started toward the bridge door. "Just get this damn thing ready to take off!" His voice trailed off as the bridge doors slid closed behind him with a heavy metallic grind.

Mitchell stared at the doors for a second longer, then faced forward again and gazed at Ross' bare leg. She grabbed the coat flap and pulled it back up over her thigh.

CHAPTER 59

The *Orion's Belt* Casino

Mayhem ruled in the *Orion's Belt Casino*. Tables, chairs, objects of all sizes and shapes, along with the occasional life form, were being hurled in all directions in a cyclonic storm of violence.

The ear-piercing rapid-fire discharge from a Klingon assault disruptor suddenly broke through the cacophony of chaos, which fell silent as everyone froze and all eyes turned to find Prath brandishing the weapon aimed at the ceiling. The myriad of gaming machines beeped and chimed—the only sounds that remained as dust and debris rained down from above onto the tables and patrons closest to him, coating them in a fine white powder.

Prath carefully surveyed the crowd, then handed the weapon off to Corba, who took it and held it at the ready…just in case. He walked slowly through the crowd, studying everyone closely, passing several of his own soldiers, who now stood like statues at attention. He reached the main bar and turned his back to it, and once more scanned the sea of faces before him for what seemed like a very long time.

"Everyone having a good time?" he finally asked, his tone replete with sarcasm.

One of his intoxicated soldiers who had bolted to attention only moments ago offered the only response—then he fell to the floor, unconscious.

"You know, I hate this city. I really do. In fact, I hate this entire wretched planet. Would that I could just destroy it and save myself a lot of grief. So let me make this very clear. I will find what I am looking for, even if I have to reduce this miserable, filth-ridden city to rubble."

Prath surveyed his rapt audience for a few moments before continuing. “This can be easy, or it can be difficult. Your choice. I am looking for a Federation fugitive named Varian Cain. Whoever brings him to me alive will receive a substantial reward.”

“Commander Prath!” Corba called from across the room where he was standing next to Corrigus and his two bodyguards. “Several Earthers stole this man’s vehicle and drove away from here!”

Stella, disarmed and held by two Klingon soldiers was manhandled in nearby. One of the soldiers had a swollen eye.

Prath pounded his fist confidently twice on the bar and then strode quickly through the fear-filled crowd toward Corba, stepping indifferently over the Klingon soldier who had collapsed earlier. “Who are you?” he grumbled at the fat man.

“Who I am is of no importance,” Corrigus answered. “What I can offer—is.”

CHAPTER 60

Escape from Naska Starport

Outside Harry's hanger building, Kirk started the engine of Corrigus' limousine and the headlights came on automatically, shafting diverging parallel beams down the desolate street through the swirling snowflakes. He gripped the steering wheel and turned it hard to the right as he started to drive the limousine forward and into a small service alley. He paused and looked through the flakes as they streaked toward him. 'Stars in the grass' he heard Annie's voice call from his distant childhood past. He smiled.

Then a tinge and ache in the pit of his stomach reminded him that it was all but certain that Starfleet would never let him set foot aboard a starship again—if he did back. Too much had changed. Everything had changed. Everything was a lie. This was not his Starfleet. Not his Federation. Suddenly he felt like a man without a country and that epic emptiness was magnified in the bitter cold and loneliness of sitting by himself in that car on a far off planet. Nothing was as it had seemed and nobody was who they said they were—nobody but Annie and Gary.

Something gleamed brightly on the rear-view monitor screen. Then he spotted what looked like several sets of vehicle headlights down the road a distance, drifting slowly back-and-forth from one side to the other and then back again. They were getting closer!

He spun around to look out through the back window, but the privacy tinting was so heavy that he could barely distinguish anything. He threw open the door, climbed out, and looked back over the top of the limousine.

Harry was right. Corrigus' limousine must have some sort of security tracking device connected to it. He slammed the door and closed his fist around the small device Harry had given him as he sprinted as fast as he could toward the still-open and uncloaked doorway, slipping and sliding all the way in the snow. He thumbed the appropriate button as he ran back inside the building, then disappeared as the bare wall hologram reappeared.

"Kirk to Mitchell!" he yelled into it. "Prepare for take-off now!" He yelled into his communicator as he flipped it open, running full speed down the narrow hallway and bolted into the hanger in front of the ship.

"Jimmy!" He heard a voice yell from his left.

Kirk slid to a stop on the still wet soles of his boots as he looked toward the source of the voice—the small, dimly lit office set against the far wall—where Cain was waving at him through the age-fogged, grime-streaked panoramic window beside the open door.

"The hangar doors have to be manually operated from in here!"

Kirk ran over and into the office, snapping his communicator shut in one hand as he held up the device Harry had given him in the other. "Maybe I can do it with this!" He started shuffling through various menus and controls and soon came to a security screen that refused him access to anything beyond it, including the hangar door controls. "He's got the damn thing blocked with an access code," he muttered in frustration. Then he shook the device as though that might help. It didn't. He locked eyes with Cain.

"I got it," Cain announced as the door controls configuration appeared on the console holographic screen.

The walls shook and the floor vibrated beneath their feet as a large portion of the opposite wall suddenly exploded into the hangar, sending a hail of concrete bits pinging off the window and covering the hangar floor with piles of heavy debris. A billowing cloud of dust and smoke filled the air, swirling in the gusting wind and obscuring everything beyond the office door from view.

"What the hell did you do?" Kirk yelled at him.

"Nothing!"

Both heard voices yelling in Klingon, and then weapons fire followed by bolts of bright energy lashing through the smoke. Kirk, followed by Cain, dropped down to the floor behind the console.

Kirk rose up onto his knees just enough and aimed the small handheld device out the window.

"What are you doing?" Cain asked him.

"Cloaking the ship!" he answered as he aimed the device toward where the ship sat somewhere hidden in the swirling smoke. He ducked back down behind the console to find Cain with his phaser out and ready.

Cain kneeled and reached up and over the console to a control that switched off the hanger ceiling lights, which would have plunged everything into near total darkness had not several emergency lights not immediately come on.

"Long way between here and that ramp," Kirk remarked as he shoved Harry's device into his pocket. Then, as he drew his phaser and checked its power gauge.

"We can use those cargo containers as cover," Cain observed.

"That'll only get us half-way there," Kirk said. "After that we're in the open."

"You go first. Once you're on that ramp, I'll open the doors and follow." Cain said as he rose up onto his knees and turned around to peer over the console again, adjusting a couple of controls as he did so. As he turned back, he saw Kirk looking at him. "Don't argue with me! Go!"

Kirk knew better than argue with Cain. He raised his phaser, drew a deep breath, and then rose up to crouch on his feet toward the doorway. Both nodded to each other, then Kirk bolted through the door, crouching as low as he could in the choking cloud of smoke, and as he scrambled toward where he remembered the nearest stack of containers being.

A series of thunderous bang suddenly echoed through the hangar. He dropped back to his knees as he heard the loud hum of huge motors and the sound of metal grinding on metal from high above. He looked up and saw the smoke cloud

swirling up and out of the hangar even as the snow that had accumulated on the doors began streaming down in large white curtains as they parted. The smoke was dissipating rapidly.

He dropped low on his hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way to the first stack of grayish containers, his knees aching as they smacked over and over on the cold hard floor.

In the office, Cain pulled himself across the floor beneath the console and then pressed his back against the wall just inside the door. With the air clearing and visibility returning, he saw that Kirk had found cover behind the first stack of containers and was preparing to move to the second. He also saw that the Klingons were starting to advance on his position.

His adrenaline kicked in and the scene seemed to play itself out before his eyes in slow motion. In his mind he saw the little boy standing by the porch of his best friend's Gettysburg home, fallen Autumn leaves swirling around his small feet. He saw the tears in Winona's eyes as he told her of George's death. Not this time. Her son and her husband were coming home and screw Starfleet and screw the Klingons and everyone else.

Fueled with rage, he rose to his feet ready to charge out into the hangar.

From the corner of his eye, Kirk saw Cain crouched in the office doorway. Just as he stood up, a Klingon he hadn't seen rose up from behind a large piece of rubble, took aim and fired at Cain.

Kirk shifted and fired and took him down easily, but not before he'd gotten off his shot. He heard Cain grunt, then looked and saw that he'd taken the shot directly in the chest and tumbled back into the office.

"Cain!" Kirk shouted. He sprang to his feet and fired wildly toward the Klingons, some of whom had begun to venture out once more from the hole in the wall, as he ran slid through the office floor and into cover where he found Cain laying against the console, breathing heavily. Blood was oozing through his shirt, its stain growing ever so slowly. The energy bolts fired by Klingon weapons were

unique, in that they somehow managed not to cauterize flesh. Somehow Klingons found a bloodless death unthinkable.

"Too old…for this…bullshit—" Cain rasped in pain as Kirk managed to right him just enough to lean against the cargo container.

"Hold on—" Kirk started as he lifted Cain's arm, intending to carry him.

"Jimmy no!" Cain shouted as he did his best to shove him away. "You have to go! Leave me here!"

"No!" Kirk protested.

"God damn it listen to me Jimmy! You have to make it! You have to go now!

Kirk could Cain's pallor had turned pale and clammy, and his face was already covered in cold sweat. His eyes were wide and their pupils glazed and unfocused. This once sturdy man; a monument and a father figure in his life, was suddenly reduced to a mere shadow of his former glory.

He turned and fired a few wild shots through the open office doorway to keep the Klingons guessing, then turned his attention back to Cain when a burst of phaser fire suddenly flashed across his peripheral vision from somewhere in the smoke still lingering in the center of the hanger. Gary. Somewhere on the boarding ramp, hidden within the cloak of invisibility.

When the confused Klingons shifted their fire in the direction of the phantom sniper, he grabbed Cain by the shoulders, preparing to move him.

"Stop it!"

"I can't just leave you here Cain!"

"You have no choice!" Cain shouted back at him. "I'll make sure those doors stay open."

Kirk drew a breath to argue, but even he knew Cain was right.

With great effort, Cain pulled the small memory module containing Arkanon's message from beneath his jacket, slapped it into Kirk's hand, reaching with his other hand to press his fingers closed over it. "Two-eleven mark fourteen," his

voice was low and coarse. He drew another deep breath and then repeated firmly, "Two-eleven mark fourteen. Remember that. You got it?"

"What's at two-eleven mark fourteen?"

"You'll know when you get there." He locked gazes with Kirk and forced a smile. "Bring him home. I promised your mother. Keep that promise for me. Bring him home. Now go, son. Go."

"Jimmy! God damn it! Come on!" He heard Gary's voice yell outside.

Kirk reached and clasped Cain's forearm firmly and squeezed. He admired the old man. Gravely wounded as he was, there was just no surrender in him. Then, with one last squeeze of Cain's forearm, Kirk spun to crouch next to the doorway again.

"I'm coming now Gary!" He yelled, and when Gary started to fire a rapid series of shots from his phaser to cover him, he launched himself through the door and ran zig-zag toward where he saw the lashing energy beams.

This instantly drew fire from the Klingons. Kirk shot wildly back at them with a rapid lashing burst of phaser fire of his own, then saw Gary—or part of him—standing in the smoke with his hand out, while firing at the Klingons with the phaser in his other hand. Kirk hurled himself past him, feeling the boarding ramp beneath his feet as he raced up. Gary fired off a couple last shots, then vanished backwards into the smoke.

Back in the office, Cain reached for and gripped the edge of the console. With his last reserves of energy pulled himself up to eye-level to peer out the observation window. He could feel a familiar buzz in the back of his skull. He was losing consciousness. He heard the telltale whine of engines and saw the smoke being displaced in the crystalline shape of the invisible bird of prey rising upward through it. With a half-smile of victory, Cain released his grip on the console edge and fell backward to the wall.

He continued to breathe in labored rasps, then he dialed his phaser to the overload setting. The weapon seemed to weigh a thousand pounds, and after a small

blue-white indicator light began to flash rapidly, he let his arms drop, cradling the weapon on his lap as he waited for the inevitable.

The inevitable came in the form of several Klingon soldiers who crowded at the opening of the office doorway and trained their weapons on him, yelling and grunting at him in their guttural tongue.

Overcome by a strange calm and serenity, Cain looked at them and smiled, then revealed the tiny blinking light on his weapon. "God, I'm tired," he said to them.

The soldiers reacted instantly and began to turn and stumble into each other in order to get away.

"Go go go!" Kirk yelled as he and Gary sprang through the door into the cramped bridge of the Klingon Bird of Prey.

Ross pulled back on the atmospheric attitude control. A flourish of engine noise rumbled through the entire compartment. Kirk felt the deck below him press against his feet as the ship rose aloft, tilting relative to what he could see through the front viewport.

Suddenly an explosion from outside in the hangar flashed through and temporarily blinded everyone onboard, rocking the ship and nearly knocking him into Mitchell. Ross regained control and, concerned over the possibility that the explosion might have damaged the ship, quickly set her back down.

"What the hell was that?" Mitchell rasped.

Kirk spun on Ross. "Punch it, Ross!"

Ross pulled back a little harder on the attitude control this time. The engines whined once more and the ship lifted smoothly into the darkness of night.

"Where's Cain?" Gary asked as he realized the man wasn't present.

Kirk caught Mitchell's gaze, which told him everything. "He's not going with us," Kirk said matter of factly.

Spock turned. “I must point out, that the blockade has no doubt been put on full alert, and while we are undetectable to conventional scanners, there is the distinct possibility that since this is prototype Romulan technology, and since they are in defacto conflict with the Klingon Empire, the Klingons may have developed and implemented countermeasures of which we are unaware.”

“Less words, Spock,” Kirk said in a tired tone.

“The Klingon blockade may be alerted to our presence.”

“Well I guess we’ll find out soon enough,” Kirk remarked. “Prepare for warp,” Kirk finally said. “Make your course two-eleven mark fourteen.”

Spock nodded, then thought for a moment, then added. “That heading will take us into the galactic void.”

“That’s your course, Spock. Make it so.” Kirk ordered, following which Spock turned front and did exactly that.

“Klingon battlecruisers,” Ross pointed out the viewport toward a pair of distant gray objects that didn’t look much larger than the stars far beyond. “Two of them.”

“Do they see us?” Kirk inquired, his sense of urgency returning.

“Uncertain. Their course indicates they are in a standard orbital patrol pattern,” Spock reported, studying his displays.

“They know we’re out here,” Kirk reasoned. “They just don’t know where.”

“A logical assumption,” Spock said.

“Warp drive, mister Ross.” Kirk ordered.

“Aye, Skipper.” Ross adjusted several controls, and Cestus’ horizon suddenly dropped below them as the infinitude of stars drifted full view, then as Ross shove some sort of instrument forward, the stars exploded toward them.

CHAPTER 61

A Shot in the Dark

A Klingon bird of prey was by design a Spartan scout vessel. Fortunately, Harry had made a few changes for the sake of comfort—changes over which any respectable Klingon warrior would no doubt have wretched in disgust. In addition to replacing the only latrine on the entire ship in the commanding officer's quarters and adding a sonic shower, he'd replaced the hard sleeping bench with a softer cushioned mattress of sorts. He'd also gutted what had to have been very cramped crew accommodations originally designed to hot-bunk twelve and had turned it into a pair of significantly more comfortable arrangement for six civilized people—a master suite for himself and a second suite with three bunks for his crew. He'd devoted every other significant space on the ship to cargo holds and the extensive cloaking and imaging system, which, as he had learned from a rather chagrined Mitchell earlier, had left no room for a weapons system.

Kirk sat quietly at one of two small metal tables anchored to the floor in the dining area adjacent to the small food prep galley, Spock's tricorder was on the table in front of him, playing Arkanon's holographic message to his father for the third time—or was it the fourth? He'd lost track.

"Don't let it end, George. You must go on without me. Good luck, my old friend. Qapla'!"

As before, the hologram wavered and reduced to static before dissolving away completely. He took the module off the tricorder and set it down on the table. Hard to believe the data contained on that little piece of outdated technology had the power to turn the last fifteen years of his life upside-down—his and everybody else's.

With the cold and the chaos of Naska Starport several hours behind them, and with the low rumble of the ship's warp engines droning on like an interminable moan of misery, the reality of Cain's death had begun to weigh on him. Cain had risked everything and had died for him and his father—and for his family—and most ironically for a Federation in which he no longer believed. And he had done so willingly. If there was one constant in his life in addition to Annie and his mother and Gary, that had been with him through all the years since his father's death—rather, his father's supposed death—it was Cain. Now just like that, his father was alive and Cain was dead.

He noticed Spock standing quietly in the doorway and looked over at him. "How long have you been there?" he asked uneasily.

"Thirty-one seconds," the Vulcan answered with the tone to which he had now become accustomed. At least he had been brief. But then he just stood there and silently waited as Kirk combed his fingers back through his hair and blinked back the moisture that had begun to build up in his eyes. "I'm sorry, Spock, do you need something?"

"May I offer my condolences on the death of your friend?" Spock offered as if having been waiting to be allowed to speak. Kirk said nothing. He just dropped his gaze and stared at the tabletop. Spock studied him silently for a few more moments, then voiced his observation. "You are obviously exhausted. If I may suggest, there accommodations onboard where you might rest."

"Yes, I am exhausted, Mister Spock," Kirk finally admitted. "In just a few short days my entire life has gone through the looking glass—please come over. You're in my blind spot."

"I do not understand your metaphor," Spock said as he walked over to stand more directly in front of him.

"Blind spot?"

"No, your reference to author Lewis Carroll's novel."

"I don't know what to believe in anymore. I find myself questioning the choices I've made in my life."

Spock glanced at the tricorder and data module on the table for a moment. "Having now viewed the message sent by the late Klingon chancellor to your father, I understand."

Understand, Kirk repeated Spock's last word in his mind. Sympathize would be the human word, but for Vulcans, to understand was as close as it would get. "There's more on here too. I just haven't figured out how to get at it. Everytime I try to unlock the encryption it just replays Arkanon's message." Spock's silence drew his attention. "Obviously you didn't come down here for that. Something on your mind, Spock?"

"Per your order, we have been maintaining our course heading of two-eleven mark fourteen for several hours now."

"And you want to know where we're going," Kirk said, his tone slightly ambiguous. Without waiting for Spock, he answered, "Well, the truth is, I don't know where we're going—other than the course itself, that is." He seemed just short of modest frustration as he picked the module up and turned it over in his hand. "I'm sure it's explained on here somewhere, if only I could get to it."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance," Spock suggested.

'Why not,' Kirk thought. He'd tried everything he could think of. "Knock yourself out," he said and gestured at the tricorder as he stood up and stretched his arms.

Spock took the seat that Kirk had just vacated, laid the module back onto his tricorder's data access plate, and then got to work. Kirk watched him for a moment, then paced slowly around the room, eyeing various objects with passing interest as he thought about other things.

"I believe that I owe you an apology, Captain," Spock said as he worked.

"Not necessary, really." Kirk intoned, really not interested as he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a moment's respite. Then it hit him. "Apology for what?" He asked.

"It seems that at some point during our escape from Naska, I misplaced your book."

"My book?"

"A Tale of Two Cities. You brought it with you when we left the Enterprise," Spock clarified.

"Ah, that," Kirk finally recalled. He'd always valued that book, perhaps more than any other, but its importance simply paled in comparison to the events of the last few days. It was the furthest thing from his mind. "Don't worry about it."

"But it belonged to your father."

"It's just a book, Spock," Kirk emphasized, noting that the man was simply continuing his work with the tricorder. "However, for future reference, you might want to look someone in the eye when you apologize."

He turned his back, deciding to let the Vulcan work uninterrupted, but after a moment's reflection on what he'd just said, he added, speaking out loud but still to himself, "Ironic."

"What is ironic?" Spock asked.

"One of the central themes of A Tale of Two Cities. Resurrection."

"The irony being that your father is alive after being thought dead these fourteen years," Spock concluded. Kirk said nothing, and after a few moments, turned back around to see Spock had stopped and was simply gazing off wherever Vulcans gazed off when they gazed off.

"No luck?"

"Was Mister Cain familiar with this book?" Spock seemed off on another subject.

"Huh? I have no idea. Maybe." Kirk answered, confused what this had to do with anything.

"There is a reason for my curiosity," Spock must have sensed this.

"Which is what?" Kirk came back.

"I posit that the person most likely to have encrypted this module would be one of three people: your father, Kalor Arkanon or Varian Cain."

"That follows," Kirk said, still unsure where any of this was leading.

"It is also my belief that to encrypt the data on this module beyond accessibility would defeat its purpose. The module itself had to be protected at all costs, but the information contained on it is too crucial to remain hidden," Spock elaborated. "The unlock code would be something intuitive."

"Okay, I see where you're going with this," Kirk began. "The pass-code would be something familiar to all parties concerned," Kirk nodded. "So that if one of them were killed, the other still had access."

"Yes.".

"Well it just can't be that difficult," Kirk started. "Wait…"

Kirk sat down next to Spock on the metal-mesh bench that ran the circumference of the table. He slid the tricorder in front of him and leaned in as Spock watched.

"Input: A tale of two cities." Kirk commanded.

Both sat and waited while the tricorder input his words. It beeped discordantly.

"Incorrect," Spock noted.

"It was worth a try," Kirk half-smiled.

"Indeed," Spock concurred, then thought for a moment before he raised his eyebrows. "May I?" Spock gestured at the tricorder. Kirk pushed it to him.

"Input: It was the best of times; it was the worst of times—" The tricorder beeped a more friendly tone, cutting Spock off, and suddenly the air above the tricorder came alive with a glowing flurry of flickering images, documents, and other data, streaming randomly and rapidly.

"Look at some of these names—it's a veritable who's-who of Starfleet. Admiral Marcus. Captain Cartwright," Kirk ticked off a couple of names he immediately recognized, then he frowned in disbelief and turned to Spock. "How the hell—?

Why that quote? What made you think of that? I mean seriously? Talk about a shot in the dark? You guessed?"

"Not necessarily. The quote is from a novel familiar to you, to your father, to Cain. It is also is the opening phrase of the novel. To open? To unlock? It seemed a logical—shot in the dark—as you call it? Add to this that the summit itself reflected the best and worst of times. Had that not worked, I would have simply tried something else."

"And you accused me of hacking into a computer," Kirk half-chuckled as he leaned forward again and absorbed another flurry of rapidly blinking visuals floating above the tricorder.

Mitchell's voice suddenly broke over the intercom, sounding almost as though he were speaking through tin cans and a string. "Jim, I think you better get up here."

"Kind of in the middle of something, Gary. What's up?"

"Ross here, skipper. It is some form of spatial disruption and it is generating significant gravimetric turbulence."

"Whatever it is, Jim, it's right at those coordinates you gave us," Mitchell added.

"All stop. We're on our way," Kirk said as he started toward the door. Spock switched off the hologram, picked up his tricorder and then followed him forward.

CHAPTER 62

Into the Mystic

Although it only took them a matter of seconds, by the time they reached the bridge Ross' spatial disturbance had grown in size to a massive accretion disk that filled the entire viewport as far as the eye could see. It kind of reminded him of the black hole he'd blown that Klingon battlecruiser down into days ago—but different. For one, it swirled faster than that black hole, and looked more like a tunnel than a hurricane and pulsated with every imaginable color of the visible spectrum.

"Well, I sure hope this is what you were looking for, Jim, because there isn't anything else around for hundreds of lightyears," Mitchell said tritely.

"Fascinating," Spock commented, drawing a smirk from Mitchell. He stepped over to the sciences station and manipulated the scanners.

"Fascinating why?" Mitchell asked, clearly uninterested in a real answer.

"It appears to be a stable wormhole," Spock replied.

"As opposed to what? An unstable one?" Mitchell went on.

"A wormhole," Kirk seemed mystified and energized at the same time. He stepped forward within inches of the front viewport and gazed at the phenomenon. "A doorway—a portal to another place in the universe," his voice dropped to almost a whisper.

"Yes," Spock affirmed. Furthermore, the fact that it is indeed stable, supports our next course of action."

Then there was silence, until it suddenly dawned on Mitchell where the conversation was headed. "Wait—you're suggesting that—"

Kirk hesitated for a moment, and then smiled, "Exactly."

"You want to go into that thing?" Mitchell was unnerved.

"Two-eleven mark fourteen. It's the only thing out here for hundreds of light-years."

"And if there was a cliff hundreds of lightyears from anything and somebody told you to jump off? Would you?" Mitchell was clearly growing increasingly perplexed.

"Can you do it, Ross? Can you navigate us through that?" Kirk asked as he all but ignored Gary and turned to her, noticing for the first time that she'd finally found some decent clothes to change into somewhere—a simple olive-green zip-up utility jumpsuit, slightly stained, with a wide belt and numerous pockets and pouches of various sizes on the upper arms, thighs, and torso. It looked a little snug across her hips and shoulders and the sleeves were too short, but it did fit her as though it were cut and tailored for a woman rather than for a man. In addition, the heavily scuffed and worn dark brown work boots she'd put on were clearly women's boots. Possibly they belonged to Stella.

"If Mister Spock will assist me with the necessary calculations, I believe so, Skipper," she answered.

"I am routing the data now," Spock advised them as he walked past Mitchell on his way to sit at the navigation station next to Ross. As if it were simply a matter of routine, both Spock and Ross found their chair restraints and secured themselves.

"Fine. Don't mind me. I'm not here," Mitchell huffed.

Kirk stepped over to the strange command chair, sat down and tightened the restraint straps across his lap. Seeing all this, Mitchell nervously backed up to another station and fell into the chair, then fumbled with those restraints while Spock finished adjusting a series of instruments on his console, then turned to Kirk. "You realize, of course, that successful passage through a wormhole is theoretical," Spock pointed out. "Our odds of our success are approximately two-hundred twenty-thousand to one."

"That good?" Mitchell nervously announced from across the bridge.

"All calculations entered, Mister Spock," Ross announced.

"Idiots," Mitchell muttered nervously, his knuckles flexed white as he gripped the arms of his chair. Kirk glanced over at him, surprised. "Klingons," he clarified. "They're idiots. Today's never a good day to die."

Kirk smiled at him. "You sound like Bones."

"Yeah? Well he's my new role model since my last one went where no-one has gone before," Mitchell snapped back, then along with everyone else, turned his rapt attention to the front view screen.

"Engines, half-impulse," Kirk instructed.

"Engines half-impulse, aye, Skipper."

"Take us in."

Ross set the helm to manual control, then gripped the control lever and started carefully guiding the vessel forward toward the center of the phenomenon.

Everything seemed suddenly to implode into a single small starlike orb, then exploded past them, giving the effect that they were racing through some sort of tunnel filled with streaming tangles of crisscrossing waves of prismatic light. The once solid reality of the bridge began to streak and smear into bands of spectral light that undulated in increasingly slower motion as each moment of time seemed to pass more slowly than the one before it. The ship began to quiver and shake unnaturally slow.

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the rough ride ended abruptly. The glowing, undulating tunnel with its streaming waves of light vanished as the ship was suddenly still, but without the expected inertia.

Kirk allowed himself a moment to catch his breath, and then realized that wherever they were—wherever the wormhole had deposited them, it wasn't quite the normal space they all knew. With the single exception of an expansive, nearly edge-on view of a spiral galaxy hanging in the distant blackness almost directly ahead of them, there were no stars to be seen anywhere.

Kirk stepped forward and stood beside Ross, then briefly rested a hand on her shoulder. "Nicely done, Ross," he said, smiling down at her.

"You know the worst thing about all that? We have to do it again to go back—assuming we're still alive at the end of it all to do so," Mitchell said, then released the double-death-grip in which he'd been clutching the arms of his chair and shook blood back into his hands.

"Where are we?" Kirk asked, gazing out the front viewport.

"Fascinating," Spock remarked. He almost seemed to marvel at his console's display.

"Again with the fascinating?" Mitchell pressed.

"If these instruments read accurately, we are no longer within our galaxy." To reinforce his claim, he adjusted several instruments and then brought an image up on the main viewport—an almost edge-on graphic representation of the Milky Way.

"We have traveled forty-two-thousand, one-hundred-twelve point six light years from where we entered the other side of the wormhole. We are in the galactic void, approximately eight-thousand light years outside the Sagittarius Dwarf Elliptical Galaxy."

Something caught his attention and he turned to a smaller display that depicted a single small yellow disk hanging in the distant blackness to starboard, and concluded, "And I believe I know our destination." He tapped a control and then looked up at the viewport again as the graphic dropped away to be replaced by the image of a massive, Jovian-sized gas giant covered in bands of swirling clouds ranging from an almost yellow-green to a deep sea-blue.

"That?" Mitchell exclaimed.

"No," Spock answered. With the touch of another button, the image zoomed in to reveal a diminutive teal-green moon hovering in orbit of the massive exoplanet. "A class-M moon orbiting at approximately…" Spock paused uncharacter-

istically for one brief moment, and then repeated his earlier opinion. “Interesting.”

“Can we stop with all the interesting and fascinating?” Mitchell rasped.

“Calm yourself, Gary.”

“Hey I think I’m doing remarkably well under the circumstances.”

Kirk regarded his friend for a moment, then turned back to the Vulcan. “What is it, Spock?”

“If memory serves, this system does not exist.”

“You mean it’s uncharted,” Kirk corrected, assuming that he understood what the Vulcan was telling him.

“No, you misunderstand,” Spock countered. “I mean to say that it shouldn’t exist because it is a myth.”

“Looks pretty real to me,” Mitchell commented, his tone heavy with sarcasm, as usual.

“Indeed it is, very real, Mister Mitchell,” Spock confirmed. “In Vulcan mythology it is called Rejetti.”

“And this helps us how?”

“Gary,” Kirk silenced him with a frown. Patience never had been one of his virtues, even in their boyhood years.

“To be more accurate, Savo-Rejetti,” Spock clarified, apparently not affected in the least by Mitchell’s badgering. “It has many names.”

“Yes, of course,” Kirk said as he stepped forward to the viewport, his gaze transfixed on the teal moon and its mother planet as he suddenly recognized the name from his academy classes on the various cultures of the Federation membership. “Savo-Rejetti,” he quietly repeated with a sense of awe.

Ross suddenly chimed in. “References to this place appear in the historical and archeological records of many of our galaxy’s civilizations. Some believe it to be

the origin from which their ancestors traveled eons ago…often described as a paradise in which all life in the universe was formed."

"You make it sound like some sort of Eden," Mitchell remarked, unimpressed.

"It is not altogether implausible that Savo-Rejetti served as the inspiration for the Garden of Eden allegory," Spock pointed out as he stood up. Then, as he joined them in front of the viewport, he added, "Many have gone in search of it, but no one has ever found it."

"I doubt any of them have ever thought to go looking for it on the other side of a wormhole," Kirk half-joked. "Its presence here certainly explains a lot, though—how the Klingon resistance managed to remain undiscovered all these years."

"Indeed. As a strategic retreat it is ideal," Spock agreed.

"Well let's not waste time then," Kirk said, serious again. "Ross, take us in. Spock, we'll need anything you have from the data module in the way of directions once we're in orbit."

"I have already transferred a set of coordinates to the helm," Spock advised.

"Course set, Skipper," Ross added as she began to gesture at her console. She turned the ship's nose up and away from Savo, then leveled off relative to Rejetti and engaged the impulse engines.

As the teal-green planet-moon began to fill the viewport, Spock took a minute to analyze the readings, then reported, "The moon is approximately point seven-eight-two the size and density of Earth. However, there is only one indication of land. The surface appears to be nearly completely covered by water. The habitable atmosphere is high in carbon dioxide and the land mass is a small volcanic island in the southern equatorial region," Spock reported as he continued studying the readings on his display. "Roughly forty-seven kilometers across at its widest point."

As the tiny island passed over the horizon toward them, it revealed itself to be a mammoth volcano surrounded on all sides by a dense green forest. Sheer cliffs hundreds of feet high ringed approximately three-quarters of the island's circumference, the entirety of which was surrounded by a narrow strip of black-sand

beach that that edged the shoreline. A large plume of dark gray smoke and ash obscured the volcano's rim as it billowed from the depths of its maw and trailed away on the prevailing winds, stretching and dissipating as it drifted over the endless sea.

"There's what looks like a good landing spot on the southeastern side," Ross reported.

"Bad time to ask, but will we be in any danger from that volcano?" Mitchell asked. "It seems to be a little active."

Kirk turned expectantly to Spock, seemingly repeating the question with his silent gaze.

"Readings do not indicate that an eruption is imminent. In fact, it appears as there has not been an eruption in over ten-thousand years," Spock replied. "However..." His voice trailed off as he scrutinized his display more closely.

"However?" Mitchell finally prompted him, growing impatient again.

Spock switched to an alternate display option and the planet immediately drifted off of the viewport and expanded into a three-dimensional holographic. He reached toward the hologram and brushed his fingers across it and the image rotated nearly halfway around to reveal what looked like a massive hurricane spiraling across the surface of the ocean. So massive, it seemed to obscure just under a quarter of the green world.

"Some sort of storm," Kirk observed.

"A cyclonic tropical system, except that it is six times larger than the largest ever recorded on Earth," Spock confirmed, putting it into understandable terms for his fellow travelers.

All eyes burned through the viewport as the leading edge of the huge swirl of dense white clouds followed the island over the horizon.

"If that cyclone continues to follow its current track," Spock continued, "it will pass almost directly over the island in less than thirty-five hours, forty-one minutes.

That is of course a rough estimate correlating several hundred weather prediction models. However, the effects will be felt long before landfall."

"How bad?" Kirk asked hesitantly.

Spock studied his screen for a few moments, then answered, "Average wind speeds could exceed five-hundred kilometers per hour. The storm surge could reach ten to twenty meters above sea level."

"So anyone on that island…" Kirk began.

"Without substantial shelter and high ground, they will have virtually no chance of survival."

A quiet hush filled the bridge, broken only by the sounds of the instruments.

"Thirty-five hours?" Kirk locked gazes with the Vulcan.

"Thirty-five hours, forty-one minutes, per current projections," Spock corrected.

Kirk drew a deep breath and exhaled slowly, then turned to Ross and said in a near whisper, "Take us down, Ross."

CHAPTER 63

The Island

No longer cloaked in invisibility or trying to charade as some other spacecraft, their borrowed bird of prey descended quickly through the thin, crimson-gold lined cloud cover as the last fiery rays of the setting sun clung to the distant horizon and shimmered across the endless primordial ocean far below.

Once through the clouds, Ross turned them toward the island that Spock had confirmed to be the only land mass on the entire planet, then leveled out and descended toward a ribbon of black sand. With a final steer of the yoke, she settled them to a smooth landing close to the treeline and then powered down.

Within minutes, the group was standing together near the extended ramp from Harry's ship, their boots sinking into the black volcanic sand of the alien beach. The soft gritty black sand sprawled some fifty meters or so from the gently crashing surf to the edge of a dense wall of towering trees that rose high into the twilight and stretched as far as the eye could see in both directions. The mammoth volcano, its rim occluded beneath a charcoal gray ring of clouds and ash, rose high above that.

"Readings indicate a cluster of structures several kilometers into the jungle," Spock reported as he scanned the surrounding environment with his tricorder. "I read no life signs, however, and the energy output is virtually undetectable."

"Could they be using some sort of cloaking technology," Kirk asked.

"Unlikely in that the structure would also be cloaked," Spock answered.

A warm off-shore sun-downer breeze billowed from the trees and down across the beach, kicking up swirls of loose, dry sand as it made its way out across the

waves. The golden sun dipped below the watery horizon, washing the sky a deep cobalt and crimson, and it wasn't too long before darkness fell, and the the glittering swirl of the sprawling Milky Way galaxy hurled itself majestically across the night sky from one horizon to the other, glimmering off the undulating ocean surface and washing everything around them in a deep blue-white glow.

"We are skids up exactly thirty-hours from now. Whatever the situation. Clear?" Kirk scanned his companions' faces as they more or less nodded or offered a brief 'aye, Skipper.' "Let's go check out that structure," Kirk said and turned to Spock. "Which way?"

Spock pointed into the darkness of gigantic trees. "About four point seven kilometers in that direction."

Kirk handed Harry's small remote control device to Ross. She examined it for a moment, then pressed a series of buttons and aimed it at the ship. With one final press of the actuator, the ship rippled as if it were reflecting off water that someone had dropped a stone into, and then vanished entirely.

Kirk took the lead and the others followed as he started trudging toward the tree-line.

The ground suddenly rumbled and shook, rising and falling beneath their feet in heaving swells much like those rising out of the surface of the ocean at their backs. The distant howling roar of some unseen creature that sounded quite large and fierce joined the cacophony from deep in the murky shadows of the forest ahead of them, then fell silent as the earth fell still.

"That sounded hungry," Mitchell mused as he stared uneasily into the forest.

"We should expect to experience regular seismic activity," Spock informed the others in a rather scholastic tone of voice.

"Thanks for the heads-up, professor." Mitchell muttered.

While the starlight shining down from the millions of stars of the Milky Way cast the primordial world into perpetual twilight, beneath the thick forest canopy it was nearly total darkness. Except for the constant chirping, squawking and howl-

ing of unseen wildlife, and with only the built-in utility lights on their phasers to guide them, the group pressed forward in relative silence.

Every once in a while, however, one of them snapped a twig beneath a boot or walked head-first into a low-flying tree branch with a rather solid thud, which brought with it a brief grunt or intelligible mutter.

As the minutes became hours, and as the massive mother world of Savo rose slowly into the sprawling galactic glitter, her sunlit glow began to cast deep amber rays down through seams in the forest canopy, reminding Kirk of summertime horseback rides with his grandfather back in Gettysburg. How long ago it all seemed, and yet ironically those memories lay far in the future as he gazed upward. The sunlight from his summer days wouldn't arrive here for another hundred-thousand years or so. And yet now he was about to re-write fourteen of those years. The loss of his father had cast such a long emotional shadow over the family for so long, that to suddenly reincarnate him felt morally wrong—against the natural order of the universe.

Suddenly, he felt an odd sensation in the pit of his stomach that he couldn't remember ever having felt before. His heart began to race, but it wasn't a reaction to some unseen threat lurking in the darkness ahead. No, it was something from deep within his core—part emotion, part physical. What was this? What if this entire endeavor was a mistake? What if his father wasn't really alive?

And what of Starfleet or the Federation as a whole? Would he be judged traitor or hero? He'd blatantly disobeyed orders, but even as far back as the days of the post-World War Two Nuremberg trials, "I was just following orders" was unacceptable as an excuse for matters of great moral magnitude. If there were indeed criminal conspirators behind the assassination of Arkanon lurking in the shadows, then knowledge of it came with great moral obligation. He had to do what he felt was right, but ultimately, right and wrong were matters for historians to decide in the future. He lived in the present.

And it was that present he was drawn back into by the uneven crunching cadence of footfalls as they trudged beneath the mammoth-sized trees choked with vines and other tangled overgrowth. It was a strangely magnified world where eve-

rything living grew to colossal proportions. The smallest tree he'd seen thus far was easily three meters thick at the base. The older growth large enough to hollow out and hide the junk-heap of a ship they'd arrived in, wingspan and all—or his family's Gettysburg house. He'd never felt so small in his life.

Suddenly there was a low rumble and the ground began to reverberate beneath them once again. A moment later the full-on temblor rolled through. As soon as the shaking subsided, he noticed Spock was already gazing at his tricorder.

Then a deep, guttural roar every bit as loud as the earthquake's rumble and twice as frightening pierced the darkness and echoed off of the trees all around them. Kirk froze in place and reached for his phaser, and saw the others do the same, except for Spock, who'd raised his tricorder in the direction of the sound.

"That was not a seismic event," Mitchell adamantly pointed out.

"Indeed, it was not," Spock confirmed as he made an adjustment to his tricorder. "The pitch and range would seem to suggest a creature of substantial size," Spock began. "Approximately six meters in height and eight-thousand and fifty kilograms in mass—and it is several meters beyond the tree line," Spock finished his analysis.

Kirk, Mitchell, and Ross all raised their weapons quickly in the direction Spock had indicated.

The beast let loose a second thunderous roar as it suddenly broke from the trees in a crescendo of snapping branches and crackling underbrush, stomping with every running step as it lumbered toward them, its eyes glinting menacingly in the planet light. The first thought that popped into Kirk's mind when he saw it was, "Grizzly bear." There was no time for a second thought.

The animal snorted twice and roared once more, then reared back and rose up on its hind legs before roaring again.

Everyone backed slowly away from the agitated beast except Spock, who just stood there, seemingly unconcerned, Kirk suddenly realized how Sam must have felt when he saw him standing defiantly in the path of that tornado so many years ago.

"Get down you idiot!" Mitchell shouted, playing Sam's role.

The animal fell forward onto all fours, shaking the ground as it did, and then resumed its menacing approach, snorting and clawing angrily with one paw at the ground.

"Enough of this bullshit," Mitchell said as he raised his weapon to fire, but Spock quickly stepped into his line of fire and then drew his own phaser and fired at the ground a few meters ahead of the beast. The bright phaser beam kicked up a fiery explosion of dirt and rock. The alarmed beast roared at the top of its lungs, backed off, and then turned away and hurried back into the darkness.

Spock turned around and looked at them as he casually holstered his phaser. "It was quite unnecessary to harm the creature," he spoke in a somewhat academic tone. "A simple appeal to its flight instincts was sufficient."

"Whatever, professor," Mitchell remarked, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "Vulcans."

"Let's pick it up," Kirk broke in impatiently before he turned his back and led the way once more into the depths of the dark forest. Everyone followed in step, with Mitchell throwing a nervous glance back in the direction the creature had just retreated.

Mitchell craned his head back and gazed into the darkness above. "I'm no expert, but these are the biggest trees I've ever seen."

Kirk gazed up as well. He'd seen the giant Redwoods of Yosemite back on Earth, and indeed they did easily dwarf them. The base of even the smallest of them could easily accommodate the barn of the Gettysburg home.

Spock responded to Mitchell. "My readings indicate that these are in fact the largest species on record in the Starfleet archives. All fourteen distinct species of trees I have observed here so far display similar gigantism." He paused for a moment, then added, "And they are on average, over ten-thousand Earth years old." Spock once again put things in terms for his Earther companions.

Just over an hour of trudging through the mammoth forest and several of Spock's science lessons later, they found themselves in a part of the forest where the underbrush was sparser and much easier to traverse. For the first time since they'd left the ship, they were able to look up and see patches of the diamond–studded night sky through the canopy high above.

With Spock leading, it wasn't long before the group stood barely a meter from what looked like an open-top hover skiff resting on the ground in front of a gigantic tree. The vehicle was no more than an oval-isn platform with a railing around it except for an opening through which to climb on and off. At the front was a small control panel built into the railing.

Kirk pulled out his phaser and shined the light upward along the massive tree trunk.

"A most curious lack of concern for security," Spock said, still buried in the readout on his tricorder.

"Or a trap," Mitchell offered just as Spock stepped aboard the skiff without hesitation, causing Mitchell to throw up his hands. "And so he just steps right on into it," Mitchell shook his head.

About fifty meters up Kirk's light splashed across the bottom of some sort of platform that appeared to be built around and anchored to the mammoth tree.

"There are seventeen levels spanning some four-hundred meters, including a large landing platform that rests just above the forest canopy," Spock said as he studied his tricorder.

"Still reading no life forms?"

"None." He paused as he slipped his tricorder back into its pouch, then concluded, "Most disconcerting."

"Because it's a trap," Mitchell baited, drawing Kirk's gaze. "I'm just saying,"

"Mister Mitchell's conclusion is sound," Spock said. "We should proceed with caution."

Then Kirk stepped into the skiff alongside Spock. Mitchell threw up his hands again in frustration. Then Ross stepped unceremoniously past him to join Kirk and Spock. "Sure, let's all just get in," Mitchell said as he shook his head, then found all three of them looking at him.

"You want to wait down here?" Kirk seemed fine with offering.

"With that thing wandering around looking for dinner?" Mitchell apparently had weighed his options and decided the sharp stick in the eye was the better alternative and climbed on.

Kirk reached beside the joystick-like controller to press a button. A low tell-tale hum vibrated through the skiff, which then jerked upward and abruptly settled into a hover, then continued to climb smoothly upward.

"Seems to know where it's going," Kirk said as he retracted his hand from the control console.

"Comforting," Mitchell commented, his expression doing nothing to hide his unease as he firmly gripped the railing and watched nervously as the ground grew ever more distant below. The skiff continued to rise high into the darkness until it finally docked with a spacious open-air platform that encircled the mammoth tree trunk. Everyone stepped out of the skiff and while the others spread out, Kirk started walking the platform, noting a dozen or so identical jetty-like docks were spaced around the outer edge. All were empty except for the one they just disboarded.

"Just our one hover-skiff," Kirk noted. "Where are the others and why did they leave one?"

"And where did they go in such a hurry?" Ross said as she picked up some sort of respirator mask that somebody had left on the railing by one of the skiff docks. He handed it off to Kirk, who regarded it briefly, then turned it over to Spock, who studied it, scanned it, and then set it back down on the railing.

"Where would they have gone?" Kirk quietly asked, thinking out loud. "There's nothing here. Just this island and lots of water."

Another quake rumbled through, shaking the platform beneath their feet. Doing his best to ignore it—fortunately it only lasted for a few seconds—Kirk looked around at all the empty jetties.

"Back through that wormhole," Mitchell pitched hopefully, then on seeing Spock's expression or lack thereof, "In whatever ships they have. They had to get here in the first place, right?."

"Such a move would be an unsound tactical risk, given the forces amassed to find them. An emergence from the wormhole event horizon on the other side would be detectable for hundreds of light-years."

"Wait—which means that when we went through…" Mitchell began.

"We could have been followed," Kirk finished for him.

"We would be wise to entertain that possibility," Spock advised.

"Gary, you and Ross double-time it up to the landing platform—check to see if any shuttles or other craft are still there. If there are, get inside and check the system for clues to where everyone went. Spock, you're with me. Let's find the command center."

A short time later, Kirk and Spock emerged from a pitch dark stairwell to find themselves in a large circular room filled with consoles and monitors—all of them powered off. Bathed in a ghostly blue-gray glow by shafts of planet and starlight that shone in through the windows that ran the entire circumference, the room was as silent and deserted as the rest of the facility.

Spock walked over to sit at one of the consoles and immediately went to work actuating a series of controls.

From off on a nearby console, Kirk picked up another filtered face-mask identical to the one they had found earlier, inspecting it curiously as he stepped up next to Spock to watch over his shoulder as he worked.

Spock noticed Kirk studying the mask. "It is a standard particulate filtration mask designed to accept a variety of attachable filter configurations."

"Thank you, Spock. I know what it is. They seem to be everywhere."

“I would point out that we have not been everywhere. We have been on the skiff docks and we have been here.”

“Whatever. They’re everywhere we’ve been,” Kirk amended. “Spock, you don’t have to parse everything I say.” He seemed transfixed by the respirator. “I wonder what they needed them for? Something we should be concerned about?”

“After we found the other mask I performed an atmospheric analysis, but other than slightly elevated sulfur readings due to proximity to that volcano, I detected no harmful airborne hazards.”

“Well they needed them for something.” Clearly not satisfied, he set the mask down on the console and turned his full attention back to Spock, who had stopped tinkering with the console. His hands had fallen to his lap.

“What’s wrong?”

“The power has been switched off at the main power junction."

“Where's that?”

“The second level,” Spock responded as Kirk turned on his heels and started walking toward the door. “I would advise against reactivating it, however,” Spock’s voice at his back halted him and he turned back to look at the Vulcan’s bland expression. “The E-M field would be easily detectable from orbit. It is most likely the reason it was switched off.”

“Spock, we’re standing on the only patch of dry land on the only habitable planet for eight-thousand light years,” Kirk told him. “We found this place. If someone wants to find us, they’re going to find us.”

Spock could find no fault with that logic as he watched Kirk yank out his communicator and walk toward the door. “Gary,” he called, apparently finding it useless to use the official call jargon. He slowed and then stopped again when no answer came. He waited for a couple of moments, then repeated the hail. “Kirk to Mitchell?”

The unmistakeable whine of a dozen or so Klingon firearms being powered up filled the room.

"DaH bijeghbe!" a loud, guttural yet raspy voice bellowed in Klingon, which loosely translated meant surrender or die. It was a catchall term to capitulate, but in this case, probably translated literally.

Kirk then raised his hands in the universally understood motion of surrender and stepped out into view; his phaser dangling from his fingers, which he dropped to the floor with a clatter. Spock rose from his chair likewise and locked gazes with a formidable Klingon officer as he and a crowd of Klingon soldiers with their weapons leveled poured through the doorway. Two of them shoved Mitchell and Ross in ahead of them.

CHAPTER 64

Prath

Bathed in the blue starlight cast by the brilliant glitter of the Milky Way galaxy strewn across the night sky, Commander Kor gazed upward in thought. He wanted to remember the coming moments, just in case it was indeed a good day to die.

Kor pondered the small mysterious data module taken from the captured Starfleet officers in his gloved hand as he flipped it over and over in his fingers? Why did Chancellor Gast decide to communicate with him directly concerning the captured prisoners and anything found on them? Anything found was to be kept secure and undisturbed. It was unnerving. Hopefully Prath would enlighten him before the Chancellor arrived.

He and a few of his most trusted warriors stood off to one side of the landing platform and watched nervously as Prath's shuttle slowly descended toward them, until the craft's landing lights suddenly came on, nearly blinding them all and forcing them to look away until the vessel finally came to rest and began to power down.

Prath emerged from the vessel alone and started down the ramp, approaching purposefully…and he did not appear to be pleased. He had just about reached the bottom when a violent quake rolled through, rocking the landing platform, thrusting it up and down and from side to side, knocking him off balance and forcing him to grab hold of the railing to avoid falling backwards. Fortunately, those who'd built the installation had recognized the natural buffering effect that the flexible trees could provide to counter the tectonic instability and had designed the

facility to take full advantage of it. Truth be told, it was a rather ingenious bit of engineering.

Without a word, Prath fixed his gaze on Kor and strode toward him as though nothing had happened.

"My Lord," Kor began nervously, stepping forward and saluting with a firm fist to his chest. Then he jumped right into his report. "Further searches have turned up no-one other than the four Starfleet officers we captured. The island appears to be deserted." Then Kor held the data module out to Prath, who took it and stared at it for a moment.

"What is this?"

"A data module we found on one of the prisoners. A Vulcan."

"What's on it?"

"I do not know, sir. I received special orders straight from Chancellor Gast that anything we found not be examined until he arrived."

"The Chancellor communicated with you personally?" Kor's hesitation told him all he needed to know.

"Find out what's on it. I don't want any surprises when he arrives," Prath hissed as he slapped it back into Kor's gloved hand.

"There is more, Excellency," Kor all but interrupted Prath, then braced himself, because he knew what he was about to say would either be his salvation or his instant death.

"Sir…one of the prisoners is James Tiberius Kirk."

CHAPTER 65

Lockup

There had been much confusion among their Klingon captors regarding where they were going to confine Kirk, Spock, Gary and Ross, but it didn't last long. Four warriors had grabbed them by the arms and roughly manhandled them onto the elevator, squeezed in with them, and then ridden it down into the levels of the installation that Kirk and his party hadn't had an opportunity to explore before their capture.

It was some sort of secure storage room, now repurposed to serve as their prison cell. For the last half an hour or so, not much had been said by anyone since not only did they not know what would happen next, but he'd also advised everyone to stay quiet in case they were being monitored. Pretty certain this was not the case now, Kirk turned away from the forcefield and looked over to see Spock standing by a small window in the otherwise windowless room that appeared to be made of unusually thick transparent aluminum. He wandered over to join him and both looked out across the night sky at the distant volcano rising high above the trees that had become such a familiar landmark since their arrival. It went unsaid that the small window offered no escape option. Besides, it was easily a quarter of a mile off the ground among the forest of giant trees, and as best he could tell, there wasn't anything between it and the ground on which they could climb down.

"How the hell did they track us?" Mitchell broke the silence with a hushed grumble as he joined them looking out through the window.

"Tachyon emissions," Spock answered with probably the least number of words he'd used since any of them had met him.

"You ask me, I think Harry had something to do with it," Mitchell muttered.

"How?" Spock asked. "He did not know where we were going."

"We've got to get out of here," Kirk stated the obvious in a low voice, breaking up the debate.

"While they will find my tricorder of little interest, it is a foregone conclusion that they will examine the contents of that data module, which of course is now unencrypted," Spock told him as he stepped up to the wall on the opposite side of the door. He ran his hand along the surface of the wall and then added, "Approximately four-centimeter thick duranium. Most likely repurposed from a cargo container."

Kirk paused and eyed the Vulcan he was ever-so-slowly getting to know and actually like. Then he motioned to Ross and Mitchell, and all four huddled up a few steps away from the door. Kirk lowered his voice and spoke just above a whisper when he said, "I'm sure you're all aware of the Klingon reputation for torture and interrogation. Needless to say, we're going to be gone before that."

"I like your optimism," Mitchell said with surprisingly little sarcasm.

"Which one?" Kirk, along with everyone else turned as they heard a Klingon voice bellow in a deep and clearly angry baritone somewhere outside the forcefield barrier-blocked door.

"That one," the answer came loud and clear from the one who had been in charge of the group of warriors who'd captured them. His name was Kor, if he'd heard the man's subordinates correctly.

The forcefield sparkled off and an impressive and imposing warrior of significantly higher rank, judging from his appearance, shoved his way past Kor. Kor and four more warriors followed and spread themselves out as the angry Klingon came right at him and grabbed Kirk by the throat, literally lifted him off the floor, and then thrust him hard against the wall.

Mitchell took a step toward them, but the warrior guards turned their weapons toward him, stopping him in his tracks. As much as he wanted to do something, there was nothing he or Ross or Spock could do.

"Do you know who I am?" the large Klingon rasped, hovering just inches from Kirk's face.

"Sorry. I'm afraid not," Kirk managed to choke out as he tried to pry the Klingon's hand away from his throat. "But if you're going to kill me, get on with it," Kirk baited.

"I'm not going to kill you. The Chancellor is on his way here and I want him to see you alive…then I'm going to kill you." Prath leaned in close to Kirk's face. "My name is Prath," he seethed. Kirk's eyes widened. "I am son of Kalor Arkanon, the honored warrior your coward father betrayed and murdered!"

"Yes, I do know who you are. I also know Chancellor Gast has lied to you. He's betrayed you, Prath. Do you hear me? Do you want to know what really happened to your father fourteen years ago? Why he was killed and who was really responsible?"

"Do not malign the Chancellor with your lies, Kirk."

"What point would my lying to you have? Your soldiers took a memory module from us when they captured us."

Prath's seemingly unwavering anger wavered for just an instant.

"Look at what's on it, Prath. It's unencrypted. Look at it and find out the truth about your father's death and who is really responsible."

Prath hurled Kirk aside, slamming him into the adjoining wall.

"My Lord," Kor interrupted again as he stepped up beside Prath.

"What!" Prath turned and glared at him.

"The Chancellor is here."

And with that, Prath spun on his heels and headed for the door, followed by the warriors who had accompanied him. The forcefield snapped on again as soon as the last warrior had left.

Shoving Gary aside, who had come to his aid, Kirk bolted to his feet and rushed to the doorway, barely stopping in time before he hit the electronic barrier. He could feel the prickly electronic tendrils of the forcefield against his cheek as he strained to look past the Klingon guard by the doorway. It felt like the static of a wool sweater in winter.

"Prath!" he yelled over the forcefield's hum. "Look at the data module! It's all there! Look at it, Prath!"

CHAPTER 66

Gast

Just as Kor had awaited his arrival earlier, Prath stood atop the landing platform and watched as the Chancellor's heavily armored shuttle descended in the starlight.

Emblazoned with the banner of the Empire on one flank and the High Command seal on the opposite, the vessel landed smoothly, followed shortly by a ramp that extended and lowered to the tarmac. A squad of warriors wearing the emblem of the Council Guard marched out in precision formation and positioned themselves evenly to opposing sides at the end of the ramp, and froze at attention. And then the supreme commander of the empire, Chancellor Gast, appeared on the threshold through the airlock. Intimidating, grim, threatening just by being present, he walked down the center of the ramp comfortable in his absolute authority. The Council Guard slammed their fists to their chests as one in obligatory salute which Gast all but ignored as he stepped off the bottom of the ramp.

"Excellency!" Prath practically shouted as he stepped forward to salute the highest-ranking warrior in the empire—his mentor, his surrogate father since the day he'd lost his own.

"It is good to see you again, Prath," Gast returned, his tone low and with the weight of decades of power.

"Excellency," Prath returned, his tone absent any of the anger he just loosed on the son of the betrayer who murdered his father.

"You have accomplished what no other has. Today is a great day for the Empire."

Prath turned and led his mentor toward the elevator. As they passed the last of the Guard, he heard them drop their salutes behind him.

"Tell me about this son of George Kirk."

"Most unimpressive. It was difficult not to kill him where he stood. Kahless knows I wanted to tear his heart out and feed it to him!"

"It is your right," Gast acknowledged as they stepped into the elevator and as the door closed behind them, "but now you have not just the blood of your ancestors, but the blood of an empire surging through your heart. Now you truly understand. Justice for all before vengeance for one."

"The words of Kahless," Prath reminded himself, trying to quell the rage within him as the elevator began its descent.

"What has he told you, this son of Kirk?" Gast's voice suddenly took on a quieter and suspicious tone.

"Lies. Nothing more. He claims that his father was not responsible for my father's death."

Gast hissed with disgust as the elevator slowed to a stop. "Is it not as I have always said, Prath?" he asked as they stepped out and started down the hall. "Earthers have no honor. Not one of them can be trusted. They are the vermin of this galaxy. Only with their complete eradication can there be order. One day soon, as the son of Kalor Arkanon, you will take your rightful place as emperor and see this done."

CHAPTER 67

Window of Opportunity

Kirk heard the force field's hum snap off abruptly, and with it came a whiff of ozone. He turned to find half a dozen elite warriors pouring into the room ahead of Prath, along with another, older warrior he'd never met face-to-face before but whom he instantly recognized. Gast. His golden sash glistened and was adorned with several large accoutrements made of gold and silver-colored metals, one of which supposedly symbolized his house, if he'd understood his lessons on Klingon culture correctly—a sort of coat of arms. In addition, he wore a long grayish cloak slung over his shoulders that hung nearly to the floor, both sides of which were weighed down with numerous military metals and insignia pins.

Kirk steeled himself as Gast approached, standing his ground and holding the chancellor's gaze. If the inevitable was coming, he'd face it head-on.

"So, this is the son of the traitor George Kirk," the elaborately adorned chancellor said as he looked Kirk over. "Not what I expected."

"You're exactly what I expected," Kirk returned flatly, without any elaboration other than a look of disgust.

Gast gave Kirk no reaction, and in fact, seemed to dismiss him entirely as he walked in front of each of them before returning to Kirk. "We have long suspected Federation complicity with the rebel cowards that fled the scene of their dishonor after murdering Kalor Arkanon," Gast said, his tone filled with undisguised disdain as he looked him over. "And now we have the son of the traitor George Kirk himself, here to carry on his father's traitorous legacy."

“Why are you really here, Gast?” Kirk shouted after him as one of the warriors held him at bay. “Finishing the job you started fourteen years ago? Making sure no one finds out the truth? You may have fooled Prath with your lies, but you can’t fool everyone forever!”

With a sweeping blow, Prath backhanded Kirk across the side of his head, bouncing him off the wall, then grabbed him by his shirt before he could fall to the floor and pulled him in close and growled under his breath as he glared at him.

“Just kill me and stop playing your stupid games, Prath,” Kirk rasped loudly as met Prath’s enraged gaze, and neither wavered for what seemed like an eternity. “But whatever you do, look at that data module, Prath,” Kirk whispered. “If you’re at all interested in the truth Gast’s been hiding from you, look at it.”

Prath narrowed his eyes at Kirk. This is not what he expected from a coward human at the point of death, which he must have surely known was immanent. It was unnerving. This human looked him right in the eyes. He had no fear.

“Prath!” Gast’s voice called sharply from behind his back. Prath let his gaze linger on Kirk a moment longer, at which Kirk had apparently decided silence was best for the moment. Kirk felt Prath’s grip loosen and he released him, still studying him as Kirk maintained unbroken eye contact with him.

“Find the rebel trash! They are here somewhere” Gast rasped to Kor and the other soldiers. “Meanwhile, the rest of us leave for home tomorrow where justice can be finally be done!” Without a beat, Gast turned and strode from the room as abruptly as he arrived.

Prath finally shifted his gaze away from Kirk, turned and followed while several remaining soldiers backed out of the room, their weapons leveled.

As soon as the force field snapped back on, the others hurried to help Kirk back to his feet.

“You are in grave danger” Spock chided, his tone sounding almost annoyed.

"Prath won't kill me." He said confidently as he stared off through the doorway. "I got to him. I know it. But we're running out of time."

"Well I'm not afraid," Mitchell announced, suddenly emboldened. "Bring on a damn trial—show trial or whatever. Bring it. I've seen enough of what's on that module."

"There will be no trial," Spock turned his full attention on Mitchell. "Chancellor Gast is obviously here to ensure this."

"Agreed," Kirk said.

"But why come all the way here and make a big fuss about bringing you back to face justice—if he just plans to kill you before it can happen? Why didn't he just let Prath kill you for that matter?" Mitchell realized he was talking rather cavalierly about his best friends demise and shrugged. "Sorry, but it just doesn't make sense, Jim."

"Oh it makes perfect sense," Kirk countered. "With my death, dies the truth." Kirk took a moment to look at each of them. "And all of you as well, unfortunately." Then he let that set in with each of them for a few moments. "Fortunately, we're not going to let that happen because we're going to get out of here, find my father, and get him back to Earth."

"That's it?" Mitchell began sarcastically. "Sure you're not leaving anything out?"

"Captain, there is something that has been puzzling me," Spock broke in, drawing everybody's attention. "On that module there are several references to a Site B. And yet, there seems to be only this base, which they apparently abandoned."

"You think they headed for this 'site B,'" Kirk followed on in agreement.

"Basic military strategy always provides for a strategic retreat," Spock confirmed.

"But we're in the proverbial middle of nowhere. There's nothing but thousands of parsecs of nothing on either side of that wormhole to retreat to." Mitchell countered.

"Nothing except this planet," Spock revised.

"They're still here," Kirk sounded like he'd had some sort of revelation.

"They are still here," Spock concurred.

"But where?" Kirk fell silent again. Then he picked up the breather mask. Another look of realization swept across his face, then both he and Spock turned to gaze back out the window. So did Ross.

"What are we looking at?" Mitchell joined their stare out the window.

"That volcano," Kirk, Ross and Spock said in unison.

Mitchell did a double-take. "A volcano? You think whoever was here went into a—volcano?"

"It is both unconventional and defensible," Spock's tone bordered on outright praise.

"Not to mention it would never occur to the Klingons to even look there. Exactly the kind of tactical retreat my father would have come up with," Kirk agreed with a half-smile aimed at Spock.

"Yeah? Well I hate to state the obvious, but none of this matters if we can't get out of here," Mitchell said.

Kirk stepped away and walked half-way to the forcefield-blocked doorway, looking out to see that again, just one sentry had been posted to guard them. Then he fell quiet, deep in thought. Spock walked up beside him with Ross and Mitchell in tow.

"There is a technique Vulcans have refined over several centuries," Spock offered. Kirk faced him. "It is a discipline which allows us to link mentally to any sentient species."

"The mind meld," Ross knowingly identified the procedure to which Spock was referring.

"Yes," Spock confirmed.

"Wait, I've heard about this. This mind meld," Kirk began, already onboard. "I think Gaila mentioned it. Do you think you could get that guard out there to lower the forcefield?"

"A mind meld is not mind control, Captain," Spock clarified formally. "You should be forewarned that I cannot predict how the guard will react. I believe the appropriate human expression is, be ready?"

"Well whatever we do, we'd better do it while we have the cover of night," Kirk said to no-one in particular as he looked toward the small window, and the volcano beyond. "We need every break."

CHAPTER 68

Escape

Sitting on the cold hard floor with his back against the wall next to Gary, Kirk locked his gaze through the doorway. Except for the faint sound of Mitchell's breathing, the room the Klingons had converted into their holding cell had been quiet for some time. Their captors hadn't thought to turn on the lights—or simply didn't care. The only illumination shafted onto the floor from the outer room through the doorway and fell off inches from Kirk's feet, leaving him in the shadows.

At the other end of the room, in the monochromatic half-light, a fading, muted blood orange glow in the window told him the gigantic mother world Savo was falling below the horizon. Soon, the night sky would glimmer with the billions of stars of the distant Milky Way Galaxy again.

Despite his determination not to, he had dozed off at some point for several minutes. He couldn't help it. He'd been going non-stop for almost two full days. He turned his eyes on Spock, standing directly across from him in the darkness on the other side of the shaft of light coming through the force-field blocked doorway. He had not sat down with the rest of them, and with his hands together in front of his face, almost as if in prayer, he was apparently in whatever deeply focused concentration it would take to attempt to mind-meld with the guard beyond the forcefield.

"Spock," Kirk whispered so softly he barely heard himself.

Spock opened his eyes and looked up at him. Breathing in, he dropped his hands to his side, which apparently was all the confirmation necessary.

Kirk turned his head over his right shoulder. "Gary." Another figure in the darkness seated next to Mitchell put her hand on his shoulder and Mitchell opened his eyes. After a moment, both he and Ross stood up to stand in the shadows near the doorway beside Kirk, who locked eyes with Spock again and nodded in the affirmative.

Spock stepped closer to the dim glow of the force-field emitters and raised his hands, clasping them together again for a few moments, rubbing his fingers, and then pressed his fingertips to the wall directly behind where the guard was standing on the other side. He bowed his head slightly and closed his eyes, then opened them again. He appeared to have fallen into some sort of self-induced trance for a minute or so before he straightened and dropped his hands to his sides and turned to Kirk, who gazed across at him from the other side of the doorway.

"What's wrong?" Kirk mouthed the words.

Spock spoke in a muted whisper. "Nothing is wrong."

"What did you do?"

"I left the impression that he just received orders to take us up to see the Chancellor," the Vulcan informed him matter of factly.

"Did it work?" Kirk asked him, following which suddenly, as if on cue, the forcefield snapped off with that familiar smell of ozone. The guard was standing in the doorway, his distant gaze transfixed in a glassy-eyed stare as he stepped in with his weapon leveled.

Spock stepped through deliberately and reached to the base of his neck. The guard's knees buckled instantly and he crumpled like dead weight, guided by Spock, who maintained his grip on him until he down and unconscious on the floor.

Kirk stepped through quickly, following which Kirk and Spock manhandled the unconscious Klingon guard, dragging him back into their makeshift cell and into the shadows out of sight. Mitchell and Ross stepped past and outside the room. Then, as soon as Kirk and Spock emerged, Mitchell jammed his finger on the

forcefield control, and with a snapping sound, the hum returned as the barrier reengaged.

Spock, meanwhile, had been methodically looking on the various shelves and cabinets, which were cluttered with all sorts of random objects. Kirk joined him and they continued rustling.

"No weapons," Kirk remarked in a hushed tone—then raising the Klingon pistol he'd just liberated. "Other than this."

"Our communicators are missing as well," Spock added.

"Anybody else think it's kind of strange there's only one guard?" Mitchell asked as he stepped up beside them before turning to Spock. "Nice move by the way."

"I cannot locate the data module either," Spock said, ignoring Mitchell, just as Kirk seemed to be doing.

Kirk turned and handed the tricorder to Spock, who took it and busily began to actuate several controls on the device as Kirk watched. "The copy you made of the data module still there?"

"It is intact," Spock confirmed.

"Good thing they're only so curious," Kirk said.

"It is curious there are no other guards," Spock offered quietly.

"What I said?" Mitchell rolled his eyes in frustration.

"We don't have time to be curious either," Kirk dismissed it and turned to the others. "Listen up," he began, still whispering, "Spock, you, Mitchell, and Ross get back to the beach, take that ship back through that wormhole with this—" He pointed toward Spock's tricorder, "Get back to Earth and get that to Admiral T'Pol."

"What do you mean?" Mitchell sounded if he already knew the answer.

"I'm not going with you," Kirk answered firmly, his tone filled with resolve. "I'm going after my father."

"Jim—you don't know if he's really even alive—sorry, but somebody had to say it."

"What's on Spock's tricorder has to get back no matter what," Kirk pressed. "With that cloaking device, odds are pretty good you'll make it. Hopefully I'll get back with my father too, but if not, at least there will be that much."

"Jim—" But then Mitchell couldn't think of anything to add.

Kirk gazed into his old friend's eyes and saw the depth of his concern behind them. Gary was thinking the same thing he'd been trying not to. This could be the last time they ever see one another.

"I know, Gary," he smiled at him, which seemed inadequate, but it was enough to quiet Gary for the moment. Then he turned to everyone else. "The future of everything comes down to what we do here now. Good luck."

Everyone shared a look in silence, then Ross and Spock started off. Gary started to turn hesitantly, then felt Kirk's hand on his shoulder.

"Listen, one last thing," Kirk started in a hushed tone.

Mitchell quickly cut him off. "No. Don't say it. I know what you're going to say, so don't. You just make it back because I am not going to tell Annie. I won't do that. I don't even like her—and she doesn't like me. So keep that in the back of your mind while you're off on your crazy crusade—"

"I was going to say—" Kirk began slowly "…that Captain Pike is aware of all of this. If you need his help, you'll have it."

"Oh," Gary reigned himself in, then saw Kirk smile at him.

"It's okay, though. She likes you."

"Really?" Mitchell was clearly perplexed. "Why?"

Kirk simply shook his head and smiled, then got serious. "Good luck, Gary." Kirk and Mitchell shared one last look before Kirk pushed him onward after Ross and Spock.

CHAPTER 69

Hell and High Water

Kirk emerged onto the skiff platform. It was oddly deserted, but then he knew that the Klingons, as relentless as they could be, were probably scouring the entire island from end-to-end on foot. They probably searched the tree-base from top-to-bottom in the hours they'd been locked up and had moved on, leaving only a skeleton force to guard just four humans who didn't even have a ship. Where would they go?

Kirk took a chance and spotted what he hoped would be there. Sure enough, the skiff they'd come up on earlier was still where they'd left it. He stepped onto it and it felt not unlike a boat on water as it adjusted to his weight. Gripping the controls, he powered it up and killed the headlight and running lights the instant they came on automatically. Gently he used the small joystick to nudge the hovering craft backwards from its moorings, then swung it about and flew off under the cover of the mammoth trees and starlight.

He flew the skiff low through the canopy of mammoth trees for a few minutes, carefully dodging their thick branches. Once satisfied he was far enough away, he maneuvered up through and just a couple meters above the canopy. The cool moist breeze felt good against his face. Thinking about the time, he realized that that moist breeze would be ripping at double-gale force in just a few hours.

He could hear the uppermost leafy branches brushing and scraping the bottom of the skiff, but he didn't dare fly higher and risk being spotted. But in a couple minutes, he began to have to gently nudge the joystick as the elevation began to increase the closer he flew toward the goliath volcano, which began to loom ever larger and taller now. Talk about a shot in the dark? He began to have doubts him-

self as he flew ever higher and closer to the rim. He could feel the temperature falling off slightly and perhaps even the air growing a little thinner, but the volcano, as gigantic as it was, was wider than it was tall. The fact that there was no perceptible snow line told him that much.

Just above the far ocean horizon to the left of the island he could just see a thin uneven charcoal black line—the first squall line of the approaching storm above the ocean. Time was running short.

Soon he rose above what had to be a four-kilometer-wide gaping maw of the volcano. He brought the skiff to a standstill hover just above the rim of the gaping canyon. A sudden, turbulent updraft gave him pause before it subsided. Sure Spock had assured him that there was no immanent threat of eruption, but this was in fact a volcano. While he wasn't worried about volcanic ash clogging the inboard hover field emitters, he was a bit concerned about the heat. He drew comfort in knowing that if site-B was indeed inside this massive example of nature, obviously getting there had to be survivable, meaning he wouldn't have to go down very far.

Nonetheless, this was a volcano.

He reached for and pulled on the respirator-mask and tightened the elastic bands snugly behind his head. Then gripping the joystick in both hands, he carefully eased the bow of the skiff beyond the rim's edge. The result was as he'd expected, but the craft responded better than he'd thought it would to his white-knuckled corrections.

He looked out over the side of the skiff and saw curtains of smoke and steam rising from a wide expanse of roiling lava four-plus kilometers far below. He didn't feel nearly as much heat as he had expected—little more than that of the sun shining on his face on a bright summer day—but then again, when was the last time he'd flown into a volcano? He felt a little more assured as he gazed down on the primordial scene.

He was going to have to circumnavigate the edge, gradually descending. It could take time he didn't have but there was no choice. If after some time he didn't find anything, he'd have to try something riskier.

With a slight adjustment of the joystick, he guided the hovering skiff out thirty or so meters and swung around so he could look at the inside edge of the maw. Then he pushed down on the joystick, which prompted the skiff to descend vertically. It was unnerving to say the least, and he could feel the increase in heat. He eased up when he thought he'd matched his descent with his distance from the inner rim, then spun the bow to the right and with a nudge, started to fly clockwise along the inside canyon-like wall of the volcano, scouring it with his eyes—looking for—anything.

It took about fifteen minutes before he made his way around the first time. He had seen nothing—not even a ledge. This was obviously not going to work, as the further he descended, the larger the circumference would be and the longer it would take to make a pass. He'd give it one more. He descended again, fifty meters this time, and began to make another pass. He could really feel the heat now, even though it was still easily two-plus kilometers below.

Salty sweat was literally raining down from his forehead into his eyes now, blurring his vision as he strained to scour the inner wall. The heated air was now a breeze as it swept upward past him, but provided no relief.

Twenty minutes passed. Nothing. Slowly it began to dawn on him that he'd been wrong. Nobody in their right mind would hide inside a volcano. Underwater perhaps—

What was that?

He yanked back on the joystick and nearly threw himself over the front as he slammed on the air brakes. Then he leaned forward as though it would help him see clearer. It looked like a cave—definitely a cavern of some sort, but the murky darkness inside shrouded both in mystery. It was a little too perfect to be natural—actually whatever—it was the only thing he'd seen so far.

But then he squinted. A tingle of excitement ran up his spine when he recognized tell-tale plasma drill striations on the walls, which unlike the rest of the jagged rock surfaces looked uniform.

Kirk grinned. But then he felt a rush of cool all over his body and his knees began to buckle. He knew what that was. He was about to faint from the heat. As his eyes began to tunnel, he jammed the joystick forward and right at the distant opening. Even if it wasn't what he was looking for, it would offer a respite. If only he could get inside before he lost consciousness…

He blinked his eyes open and found he had flipped over the skiff guardrail and into several—

Packing crates! The skiff was slightly upended behind him. Blinking several more times to clear his vision, he turned to look back toward the opening through which he just apparently come. The ambient glow coming off the lava didn't penetrate very far into the darkness.

The entire tunnel had been cut out with plasma drills at least as far back as he could see. He pushed himself off the cargo crate and slid to plant his feet on the ground. His clothes were soaked with sweat. He reached for his face and felt the breather mask. He adjusted it and staggered forward a couple steps before he redis-
covered his ability to walk upright.

Pausing mid-step, he turned back, looking for something he'd seen earlier. He fumbled around and found it attached to the control console of the skiff. It was a flashlight. Switching it on, he aimed the spreading shaft of illumination down the dark corridor and began walking.

The further down the tunnel he walked, the cooler the air grew. Then, after a few more minutes of walking, the tunnel broke hard to the right and he suddenly emerged into a large, artificially lit cavern filled with stacks of crates and boxes of various sizes and shapes, some of them opened and partially emptied, others still closed and possibly sealed—obviously a hastily deposited cache of supplies and equipment.

There were also several more skiffs parked side-by-side along a far wall. He noted that one of them had an energy emitter mounted to the front—perhaps the drill they had used to tunnel through the volcanic rock to hollow out this place. His heartbeat quickened. If the skiffs were here, then so were the Klingon rebels. So was his father.

If anyone was nearby, they certainly hadn't heard him come in. What's more, he hadn't noticed any security cameras or drones.

He turned to start down the one corridor that continued into the bowels of the tunnel.

"Do not move!" a deep voice shouted from behind.

CHAPTER 70

Truth and Death

An industrial-type light fixture powered on high above, almost directly overhead, and brightened in just a few seconds, illuminating the entire room, along with a group surrounding him of some of the most desperate looking Klingon warriors he had ever seen, leveling their vintage weaponry at him. Some of them were older, and with graying beards and hair.

"Wait!" someone shouted from the distant darkness.

Kirk spun toward a strangely familiar voice and peered into the darkness of the mouth of the tunnel hallway that he had planned to head down. Somewhere in the shadows beyond the fall-off of the lighting, a silhouetted figure of the voice who'd yelled began to walk toward him, his hollow footfalls echoing off the tunnel walls as it drew closer.

Soon the dark silhouette stepped into the light spilling into the tunnel from the room, dramatically revealing him from the feet up as he stepped forward, finally falling onto the face of a human male. Despite the longer hair and the beard and mustache that covered the lower half of his face, and despite the streaks of gray that ran through both, Kirk recognized the man immediately, as though he'd just seen him yesterday.

"James?"

"Dad?" Kirk's words crackled through the dryness in his mouth.

The man stepped forward slowly, finally face-to-face with Kirk as both studied each other's eyes.

"My God, look at you," he said in a hushed whisper, finally raising his arms, reaching for him, gripping each of James' shoulders, causing a visible flinch as he did. Kirk felt himself go rigid as he realized what was coming.

And that was exactly what did. The elder Kirk drew him close into an embrace. James didn't resist as his father tightened his arms around him, but neither did he return the affection. He was close to vertigo when his father finally loosed his embrace and drew him back to arms length, one hand still gripping each of his shoulders, searching his face with those still piercing eyes.

"Cain got to you in time," his father said as he released him, apparently unaffected or unaware his son hadn't returned his affection. A smile creased his face. "Good." Then, looking around, he asked, "He isn't with you?"

"No. He's…he's gone…Dad." Dad. Words felt strange on his dry tongue and mouth before he cleared his voice. "He was killed. I'm sorry."

"Cain's dead?" The news clearly shook George. "How?" he asked quietly as James suddenly remembered they were not alone. The contingent of Klingon rebels, while they'd lowered their weapons, were equally in awe watching father and son reunite.

"Saving us," James clarified.

As his father absorbed this, James looked around at the Klingons again. Even the youngest of them were well into middle-age. Their uniforms were of an older design, some showing signs of having been repaired or modified over the years, and there weren't very many of them—maybe twenty or so.

"What about the memory module?" his father finally asked him.

"Taken. Prath has it. We made a backup copy—"

"Prath? Arkanon's son?" George asked, his tone more inquisitive.

"Yes. I sent someone back to Starfleet with the copy of everything that was on it."

"Then you broke the encryption," George smiled.

"Yes. And we looked at it."

"Good. Then you know everything." George drew a deep breath, exhaled, then asked, "And your mother?"

"She's safe," James answered. "But she doesn't know."

"No, of course not. It would not be safe."

The distant look on his father's face told him he was lost in the moment as well.

"Is this all of you?" Kirk again looked at the ragtag band.

"This?" George half-chuckled. "Hardly." Then he studied James' face again. His odd detachment from their predicament was becoming a bit disconcerting. "You haven't changed,"

"There's something else too," he began, then stepped closer almost as if to keep what he was going to say from the others.

"Yeah, we're in a bit of trouble too, Dad. Gast is here."

George's face lit up. "Gast?"

"Yes, unfortunately. We were followed and unfortunately there have to be at least half-a-dozen Klingon warships in orbit by now. Not to mention boots on the ground scouring this island for you. They don't know about this place, fortunately. I mean, who would think of hiding—here?"

"We evacuated here when we learned that the storm track passed over this island."

"Right," James said.

"All weapons down!" Gast's authoritative voice bellowed as a legion of Klingon warriors swarmed all around them, pouring in through the hallway in which James had come.

Prath and Chancellor Gast stepped into the room.

"So," Gast began as he and Prath stopped just beyond arms length of the Kirks. "It is no myth. The murderer of Kalor Arkanon is alive," Gast paused to re-

gard the motley bunch of Klingon rebels, then concluded, "and this is what remains of the once mighty rebellion?" Gast brought out and tossed a small hand-sized object onto the floor in front of the Kirks.

"Tracking beacon," George said as he shook his head.

"We knew that you would try to escape, and when you did, you would lead us right where we wanted." Gast's words fell with utter disdain.

Prath stepped slowly toward George, rage in his eyes. "You betrayed and killed my father. He came to you in peace and you betrayed and killed him!"

"Prath," George whispered, his eyes lighting up as he recognized Kalor's eyes in his.

Prath backhanded George across the face, spinning him around and hurling him backwards to the ground, and then stepped over him and drew his dagger.

"No!" James shouted. He lunged forward to stop the commander, but one of the imperial warriors stopped him first.

"Prath!" Gast shouted, which with all the authority behind it, just barely held Prath from exacting his bloody revenge. For added safety, two of Gast's soldiers stepped in to hold Prath back.

"You may have fooled him, Gast," George said, wiping the blood from his mouth and chin with the back of his hand as Prath allowed him to stand up again, "and you may have fooled everyone else with your deceit, but there's proof of your treachery on its way back to the Federation as we speak."

"Is it not pathetic, Prath?" Gast asked calmly, sneering at both Kirks with confidence. "You see it now, don't you—what I have told you all these years? How easily deceit rolls off their tongues? Then he turned his attention to George. "You speak of the others who were captured with you. They will be found," Gast said dismissively in English. "There is nowhere to go."

"You keep telling yourself that," George did not back down.

James, who had been ruminating, reached a decision and suddenly stepped forward, and raised his voice enough for all of Gast's soldiers to hear.

"Listen to me! All of you! I'm a dead man! I will die today because I choose to die today! I choose truth and death!"

"No James!" His shocked father started to spring forward to intervene but was manhandled and held by two soldiers. "Do not listen to him! I'm the one you want! Me!"

James didn't waver. "On Earth, there's a long tradition of the deathbed confession and the weight it carries! Klingons call it 'truth and death!' I claim truth! I have proof and I claim truth!"

"No! He does not know what he is saying!" George shouted as he wrestled with his captors. "I am the one! You came for me!" He turned with a pleading expression to James. "Son—you don't understand what you are doing."

"I understand completely, Dad. It's time to set things right." He turned to Prath. That data module you took from me?" He turned and faced Prath directly. "The truth is on it if you are brave enough to face it, Prath! I am willing to die for truth!"

With that James fell to his knees and let his hands fall to his sides in complete submission, perplexing Prath so much so that he simply stood there in shock.

"Prath!" George screamed through his glistening eyes. "My son does not know Klingon customs. You want me. Take your vengeance on me. That's what you came here for." A tear escaped and rolled down his cheek as Prath turned to look him in the eyes. "Exact your justice out on me, Prath. Not on my son."

Gast, slightly unnerved, rasped in disgust. "The courage of truth is unknown to them, Prath." He stepped closer to George. "Your kind has poisoned the the galaxy for the last time."

Gast stepped back and addressed everyone. "There will be no death here today!" Gast's voice bellowed. "Traitors and liars do not dishonor death by choosing the day they die!"

He turned to one of his soldiers. "Take them all back to the tower and confine them!"

CHAPTER 71

Father and Son

James Tiberius Kirk was once again back in the same makeshift holding cell from which Kirk, Spock, Mitchell and Ross had earlier escaped, only this time he had his father and the rebel Klingon band with him.

He sat quietly beside his father in silence. The two of them hadn't had much time to talk before their capture. Yet, after fourteen years of silence, where does one even start?

"How's your head?" he finally asked, hoping to spark some manner of dialogue when he noticed his father rubbing the side of his jaw where Prath had belted him earlier.

"I've been thrown by a horse or two in my lifetime," George half-smiled.

"And when was the last time you got thrown by a horse?" James threw back at him. He heard the deep-rooted resentment in his rebuke and realized immediately it wouldn't prove helpful. Not right now.

He stood and walked over to the window, primarily to get away before he lost it. Outside the leaves were fluttering on branches that were undulating. Thick gray-green clouds had begun crowding into the sky that only a few hours earlier had afforded that magnificent vista of the Milky Way galaxy.

"Won't be long now," he suddenly noticed that his father had stepped up beside him to gaze out the window with him. "We had one hit like this maybe a year after we got here. We got lucky, though. It tracked north and we were spared the brunt. The storm surge was still bad, but it could have been a lot worse. We built this place not long after that."

"Good thing," James said, this time in a friendlier tone.

"I suppose we should be thinking about escape?" George said almost flippantly as he scanned the room. "How did you manage last time?"

"We had an advantage," James said, still looking up at the sky, "An advantage who's hopefully through that wormhole and well on his way back to Starfleet."

"That wormhole was a God-send, I tell you. We could slip back and forth for supplies, which usually meant raiding an Imperial convoy." He paused for a moment, his thoughts drifting back over the years. They could never figure it out… until now."

"Yeah, sorry about that," James said apologetically.

"It's not your fault. I asked you to come here."

James studied his father's face, which suddenly seemed to have aged a lot more than just fourteen years. "My father, leader of the Klingon rebel forces," he said, almost chuckling.

"Ironic."

"Ironic?" Try as he might, he couldn't contain himself any longer. "Dad, we thought you were dead. The recovery teams found your body in the wreckage right alongside Arkanon's." James' eyes glistened. "I—we had a funeral."

This drew a full smile from the older, more experienced man. "That was the brilliance of Kalor Arkanon. When the bomb exploded on the President's transport, he knew what was up. President Alarius was dead along with his protective team. Kalor was dying. I was unhurt, but we were literally falling out of the sky. In those last moments of his life Kalor was still clear enough to know exactly what to do. First he made his officers swear their allegiance to me. Once they'd done that, he had them hustle me into the onboard transporter and beamed me to one of their battlecruisers, and we escaped. After I beamed out, with his last breath, Kalor had a duplicate of my body replicated from the pattern stored in the transporter buffer. As I'm sure you know, when you reconstitute organic matter from a transporter's pattern buffer, it becomes inert—but that didn't matter since I was

supposed to be dead. That's what they found in the wreckage. Leave it to Kalor to have a plan. Live to fight another day and all that, you know." Tears pooled in his eyes. "The last image I have of him is on the floor of that shuttle, somehow smiling at me in the face of death."

A long silence consumed the air as James pondered the emotions in his father's eyes.

"Well the rest you know. Every captain, crew, and warship loyal to Arkanon fled into the void where we stumbled onto the wormhole. Next thing I know I'm here and the leader of the Klingon resistance. Quite an honor I suppose."

George turned and locked eyes with his son, who was obviously processing everything.

"Arkanon saved me. He saved you. He saved our entire family…and he embraced death in order to do so. That's why I did what I did."

"I'm okay with spending the rest of my life wrapping my brain around all of this—" James countered, but then relented, "But Mom?"

"Yes," George frowned thoughtfully. "How is she? Did she ever re-marry? I wouldn't blame her if she did of course. Fourteen years is a long time—not to mention I was dead."

James shook his head. "I don't think she ever got past losing you—none of us did. But with her? Deep down I think she just couldn't bear the idea of ever going through something like that again."

"She deserved better," George reflected. Then he fell silent.

"She kept granddad's farm…" James stopped short, realizing that he had just stumbled into having to tell his father that his father was gone, but continued when he saw his knowing gaze. "Granddad died about a year after we lost you—thought we lost you."

George seemed to deflate right where he stood, obviously taken aback by the news of his father's death. Their parting words so many years ago hadn't been good.

"Mom started writing," James went on. "She even translates her stuff into several other languages herself because she doesn't trust anyone else to do it right."

George seemed pleased by that and nodded. "She often talked about how much she wanted to start writing. Good for her."

One of the rebel Klingons grunted something of a warning, alerting everyone. The force field dropped suddenly, abruptly ending that same discussion yet again. Prath marched in, flanked by his personal guards and wearing a hateful look on his face, and headed straight for them. They turned to meet him head-on.

"You will be glad to know that you will soon be on a ship bound for the Klingon home world," he informed George.

"You came all the way down here just to tell me that, Prath." George said. "Or maybe there's something else you want?"

"I want nothing from you," Prath hissed, looking as though he could barely contain his rage. "Nothing…except to witness the eventual annihilation of your kind."

"Arkanon would be quite disheartened to hear his son talk like that."

Before George saw it coming, Prath had grabbed him by the throat, lifted him off of his feet and pinned him against the wall. James jumped to interfere, but two of Prath's guards quickly grabbed him by the arms and held him back. The other guards trained their weapons on the rebel warriors.

"If you dare to speak my father's name again, I will kill you!" Prath proclaimed through gritted teeth.

"Go ahead. Do it," George replied calmly, looking him right in the eye. "You might as well, because if you don't, Gast will."

"For God's sake, Dad!" James shouted.

"James, don't interfere!" George shouted back, warning his son off sharply. Then he locked eyes with Prath again. "Your father sent me that data module right before the summit. Before you avenge his death on me, you should really have all your facts straight…unless of course you're afraid of the truth."

James threw his arms up in bewilderment as he watched helplessly while his father dangled precariously within an inch of his life…again.

"Why would I have betrayed your father, Prath?" George pressed, hoping to plant a seed of doubt. "Ask yourself that. Not only was he my friend, we had the same goals. What could I possibly have gained from his death? Look where it's gotten me."

Yes, he saw it in Prath's eyes as they darted briefly to the rag-tag collection of rebels and then back to him. A hint of doubt. Then a warrior wearing the sash of the Imperial Guard rushed into the cell and approached him. "My Lord," he said. "The chancellor orders you to join him on the landing platform."

Prath stared at George for another moment—some of the hatred seemed to have spilled out of him like the wind from luffing sails. Then he released his grip, letting him fall to his feet as he backed up, turned and then stormed out of the cell, his guards following closely behind him.

James put a comforting hand on his father's shoulder and asked him, "Are you out of your mind, Dad?"

"You're one to talk after that stunt you pulled earlier. Paybacks are a bitch, huh?" His father smiled briefly, then gazed through the force-field protected doorway. "But I think I got to him."

CHAPTER 72

The Module

Prath was conflicted as he rode the elevator to the landing platform in answer to his summons from the Chancellor. He found Gast standing alone at the railing, gazing out over vast, dense forest treetops at the massive bank of clouds beginning to roll in. His personal security stood a short distance off. The breeze had picked up and become a steady buffeting wind that on any other day might have been pleasant, bringing with it an aroma thick with tropical moisture.

"You called for me, Excellency?" he asked as he approached his mentor's side.

"You will not visit the prisoners again," Gast replied. Then he proclaimed, "It is not fitting for the future leader of the empire."

"As you wish, Excellency," Prath returned after a longer than usual pause.

Gast turned to face him directly, studied his face for a few moments, and then explained, "You are so much like your father, Prath. You have a passionate heart. Your father's only mistake was believing in the nobility of Earthers . They are not what they claim to be. Their hearts are ruled by greed and possession. They are creatures of consumption. You can no more apply the values we Klingons cherish to them than you can to a tree or a rock. They have no place in the the master plan of the universe."

Prath said nothing as he gazed out at the expanding front of gray-green clouds.

"This data module you took from them. Have you looked at it?"

"I did not think it important, Excellency."

"Lies must not distract us from our goals now that we have come this far. Destroy it."

"It will be done, Excellency."

"Soon we leave for home. Return to the Aavion and prepare the fleet for departure."

"Yes, Excellency." Prath watched as Gast turned and walked away, heading toward the elevator. The chancellor's guards converged on him, and as they grew further away he pulled out his communicator and pressed the transmit button. "Aavian," he called. "Bring me up." The transporter beam washed over him and whisked him away to the ship.

A short time later, lost in his own thoughts, Prath stood quietly by the lone window in his quarters and stared out at the watery world drifting below him against the sprawling vista of the Milky Way galaxy. The door buzzer sounded.

"Enter!" he responded without turning. Troop Commander Kor entered and stopped just inside the doorway and saluted Prath's back.

Kor hesitated for a moment when Prath offered nothing in return, then stepped forward nervously. "My Lord," he continued, very nearly stammering as he spoke. "I have received direct orders from the Chancellor to destroy the memory module you gave me."

"Then destroy it," Prath ordered, cutting him off dismissively, without looking at him.

"Yes, but…My Lord…" Kor seemed unable to force the words past his lips, which annoyed Prath, who spun around and towered over Kor, who was visibly shaken.

"The Chancellor of the Klingon Empire just commanded you! Why have you not done as he commanded?"

Kor snapped to attention. "I will always be loyal to the son of Kalor Arkanon and die at his hands with honor if that is to be my fate!" Kor pronounced, perhaps

his last mortal words, then boldly thrust out his hand, in which was the memory module. “My Lord, you should see it.”

Prath looked at him for a long time as he stood with his hand outstretched. Kor steeled himself and closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

“You have seen what is on it?” Prath asked, lowering his voice.

Kor opened his eyes. He was still alive. “As you commanded, Excellency!”

“Leave it and go,” Prath finally said as he turned to look out through the window once again. Kor wasted no time setting the module down on Prath’s desk, then he spun on his heels and left the room post-haste, punctuated by the sound of the heavy armored airlock doors slamming shut. He’d lived another day.

Prath gazed silently out the window for a few more moments, then looked at the small data module resting on his desk.

CHAPTER 73

Enterprise

Captain Pike leaned forward in his chair, his eyes locked through the front main viewport, watching as the wormhole's last spiraling tendrils finally peeled off and spit the Enterprise out of hyperspace. The rather large orange-brown planet of Savo leaped straight toward them like a curve ball but quickly slowed thanks to Spock's calculations, which he'd adjusted now that he'd been through the wormhole twice.

"Shields up! Battle stations!" Pike ordered as he dropped his gaze to his helm officer, whose hands deftly played the helm controls as the red alert klaxon started wailing and the lights shifted to a redder hue.

"Starships Yorktown and Lexington have emerged from the wormhole, Captain," the comms officer reported.

Pike turned his chair farther around to face her. "Ship-to-ship, down here," he ordered, pointing at the comms panel on his chair's right armrest.

"Ship-to-ship, Captain."

Pike tapped the control on his armrest. "Enterprise to strike force commanders, deploy to attack formation and hold for go."

After a few moments the comms officer nodded and affirmed, "Yorktown and Lexington acknowledge, sir."

Pike turned his chair to the sciences station, where Spock and Admiral T'Pol had been standing and quietly monitoring the sensor readouts. "Adjust hailing fre-

quencies to the coded channel I provided," Admiral T'Pol instructed, speaking succinctly as she stepped from Spock's station over to the Comms station.

The young officer complied and then told her, "You're on, Admiral."

"Attention, commander Klingon liberation fleet," she began. "This is Admiral T'Pol of the Federation strike force."

Long moments passed in silence before a strange shrill static suddenly exploded over the speakers. Then the static stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and a low voice broke in. "This is Commander Kerla of the warship Amar."

"Commander, we have arrived at the rendezvous point."

"We are here," the voice came back in typical succinct Klingon fashion.

"There!" Tyler shouted as he raised a hand and pointed at several small but bright plasma bursts that suddenly appeared on the viewport. Six older D-5 battlecruisers dropped out of warp ahead of them and slowed quickly. The insignia and other markings on them were faded and in some cases, worn off completely.

Pike leaned slightly toward his comms panel as he spoke into it. "Commander Kerla, this is Captain Christopher Pike of the Federation starship Enterprise."

"Captain Pike," Kerla's voice came back, "We stand ready to engage with you."

"Acknowledged," Pike responded succinctly. "Stand by." Pike switched channels. "This is Captain Pike to task force, deploy to attack pattern epsilon-alpha."

"Several enemy warships have broken Rejetti orbit and are on an intercept course!" the tactical officer yelled from his station.

Pike turned and locked gazes with T'Pol. "Anything from Kirk's team?"

"Negative," T'Pol responded evenly.

"Enemy Klingon ships deploying to standard attack formation!" the T.O. announced from his station to the left of T'Pol and Spock.

Pike punched the comms panel on his arm rest. “Enterprise to strike force. Engage. I repeat, engage.” Just as he finished, he saw one of the enemy battlecruisers’ primary torpedo launcher light up.

“Incoming!” Tyler yelled.

The bridge rumbled and shook as the torpedo found its target. Pike knew the first thing Klingons always went for was the flagship, so this wasn’t entirely unexpected. in fact, he’d planned for it.

“Shields holding!” The T.O. yelled.

“Evasive pattern delta-five! All phaser stations, fire!” Pike yelled over the din. “Photon batteries, prepare dispersal pattern alpha!”

All eyes turned to the main screen as multiple beams of bright blue energy lashed out from several points along the Enterprise’s hull and strafed the battlecruiser’s shields amidships and raked along her neck, cutting a line of sparks and explosions.

“Enemy shields holding! He’s making for our starboard bow,” the T.O. warned.

“He’s going for our port nacelle!” Someone else advised.

“I know what he’s doing,” Pike all but admonished whoever it was for stating the obvious. “Make him work for it, mister Tyler but be sloppy about it,” Pike added as he stepped back to his chair, knowing that he had to make his adversary believe wholeheartedly that he was foolishly arrogant if what he did next was to work. He jammed his finger down on his comms panel. “Mister Scott, I need port nacelle plasma vent controls routed to bridge nav!”

“Ya got it, sir!” Scotty’s voice came right back.

“I have it,” the navigator shouted next to Tyler as he swiped at his console.

“The moment they have weapons lock, I want a five-second vent of plasma from the port nacelle. Five seconds! No longer. Clear?”

“Five-seconds,” Tyler repeated back to him as he adjusted several controls on his console. “Standing by on vent controls, Captain,” Tyler confirmed.“Viewport

astern," Pike ordered, shifting his gaze forward again. The image on the main screen instantly switched to an aft view looking over the saucer and between the nacelles, just as the enemy vessel swept into view. Another alert indicator in the center of the helm-nav console began to flash and beep.

"Enemy weapons lock!" Tyler yelled. "Venting plasma!" Tyler slammed his fingers down on his controls. A violent but concentrated shaft of luminescent plasma blew out from the Enterprise's port nacelle like a jet of steam from a broken pipe and toward the attacking D-6. The torpedo had barely cleared the tube when the plasma stream swallowed it whole, and milliseconds later it exploded in a violent flash of brilliant white light, hurling the enemy vessel upward and away, pitching backward end-over-end as charged particles, blazing plasma, and explosions racked across its hull.

"Enemy shield array has collapsed!" the tactical officer yelled, although to be more precise, it had actually blown out from within.

"Helm, come about! Fire everything!" Pike shouted. The view on screen shifted back to forward view again, and seconds later the wounded D-6 drifted back into view, tumbling out of control.

Several flaring phaser beams lashed and pummeled the doomed warship. One of them breached the port wing's forward grating and blew up inside, tearing the port engine and its strut away from the main hull and sending it tumbling away, exploding, sparks dancing across its surface, until it finally tumbled out of view.

"Enemy ship disabled!" the tactical officer reported—a report that was met by a resound of cheers.

"Form up with the rest of the task force."

"Aye, sir!"

Pike burned his eyes through the front viewport, which had switched back to a forward view, full of glowing radicals around the various ships battling it out.

"We're in the thick of it now."

CHAPTER 74

A Perfect Storm

Torrential curtains of nearly horizontal wind-driven rain raked relentlessly across the landing platform as the treetops swayed violently.

Two squads of warriors, including Gast's own elite unit, pushed their rebel brothers and the Kirks from the elevator into the squall. Walking against the bullying wind proved difficult as they made their way toward Gast's personal transport, which was flanked by a troop transport, which James presumed they were about be put aboard. Back in their makeshift cell he'd watched as the sky grew darker and more ominous almost by the minute. As bad as this was, it was nothing compared to what it was going to be when the full brunt of the storm hit.

He squinted through the warm, face-stinging rain and saw Gast and several of his minions approaching them from ahead. Gast raised a hand and their warrior escorts immediately jerked them to a halt in front of him.

Gast bellowed something in Klingonese at one of his officers—presumably one of the transport pilots, as he thumped a fist to his chest and then rushed off toward one of the vessels.

"What's it going to be this time, Gast? Blow up the transport again?" George shouted at Gast through the driving rain that raked his face.

James watched Gast step up in front of his father. "Arkanon was a fool to believe there could ever be peace between Terran and Klingon!" Gast shouted over the wail of the wind. "His Klingon heart died long before his body. His failure was his belief in a friendship with someone like you.

George locked eyes with Gast with a look of firm resolve in his eyes. “The house of Gast be damned for what you did!”

“Dad!” James exclaimed, feeling as though he’d just been punched in the solar plexis. He wasn’t the expert his father was on Klingon custom, but he knew his father had just issued a challenge of honor in public, and such a challenge could not be satisfied except by the two of them battling to the death!

Ignoring him, his father shook free of the hands that held his arms and took a single step toward Gast, then raised his voice in what sounded to him like flawless Klingon, apparently for all of the Klingons to hear. James didn’t understand the meaning behind any of what his father said, but he did recognize some of the individual words and a phrase or two—words and phrases like G'now juk Hol pajhard, Mauk-to 'Vor, Qab jIH nagil, Sto-Vo-Kor, Kahless, and Kanjis.

A chorus of gasps rose against the rain from the Klingons of both contingents. Gast’s countenance likewise expressed his surprise, if not outright shock. In so many words, George Kirk had brilliantly outmaneuvered and manipulated him into combat. In his fourteen years among Klingons, his father had apparently learned not only their language, but also their traditions. Victor or vanquished, life or death, when the battle ended his father, he, and the entire Kirk family would have their honor restored—and they would be free and safe from the threat of vengeance, and that freedom would be irrevocable—final. James had just witnessed a masterful stroke of tactical genius by his father.

“Dad,” James began as his father turned to him again and laid his hands firmly on his shoulders.

“James…son…listen to me. There’s nothing you can do. It’s done.”

“I will not fight you, Earther!” Gast bellowed, his tone weighted down with disgust. Your life belongs to another.”

A wave of relief swept through James, filling his heart with calm, but that moment didn’t last for very long, as he’d known the moment his father started turning toward Gast again that it wouldn’t.

"Excellency," one of Gast's dumbfounded minions said in English as he stepped forward. nervously. "The challenge has been made as written in the Scrolls of Kahless."

"That is for Klingons!" Gast rasped angrily at his subordinate as he shoved him away hard.

"But Kahless—"

"Kahless be damned!" Gast shouted the unthinkable. Everything and everyone seemed frozen as the gale force winds of the rain bands howled and whipped relentlessly about them. "Only another who is Klingon can second the challenge!"

One of the rebels had suddenly stepped forward and stood defiantly at attention before Gast. "I am Kale, son of Krull of the house of Gowron!" he proudly proclaimed. "I am Klingon! George Samuel Kirk is my brother! I will fight and die for him!"

This caused a huge resound of shock through all present. Gast seethed with anger, then gestured to one of his soldiers. "Kill him!" But the soldier was obviously greatly conflicted, and hesitated in fear. "I gave you an order! Kill him!

Just then another rebel stepped forward to Kale's side and saluted as he had. "I am Gretall, son of Mortak of the house of Mok! I am Klingon! George Samuel Kirk is my brother! I will fight and die for him!"

"What is wrong with you?" Gast bellowed angrily at his disobedient soldiers. "You are all traitors!"

A third, almost regal looking older rebel with snow-white hair and beard immediately joined the first two. "I am Stass, son of Kaal of the house of Kaal! I am Klingon! George Samuel Kirk is my brother! I will fight and die for him!"

All three then thumped their fists to their chests in unison and stood proudly, steadfast and defiant as the rain and wind beat at them. It was unprecedented and profound. James knew both the history behind the ritual. He'd learned of it in the Academy's war college. Anytime an honored warrior issued a challenge in the face of insurmountable odds, one of that warrior's closest compatriots would stand for-

ward and proclaim the brotherhood of combat and the willingness to stand in his place.

But here, not one, but three warriors had in essence pronounced his father a full-blooded Klingon warrior by virtue of his previous service in battle alongside them. This was the final act in the challenge of truth and death.

"Excellency," Gast's subordinate stammered nervously. "You are challenged."

"For God's sake, Dad…" James pleaded, his voice actually breaking as tears welled up in his eyes. George turned to him, his own eyes glistening with tears as well, and took him firmly by the shoulders once more. "It's the only way, James. It's the only way to make things right."

"No!" James spun to Gast. "I will fight in his place!"

"James, listen to me!" George insisted, reaching out and turning his son back to face him. "I know this is hard for you to understand right now, but I need you to remember what happened here today."

"Dad…I'm afraid." And he was afraid—this was the mysterious emotion that had eluded him as long as he could remember—until now. His father did not hesitate. He drew James into an embrace and James threw his arms around his father for what he knew would likely be the very last time. He felt that oddly familiar vertigo sweep over him once again—just like he'd felt in the taxi when Cain told him that his father was still alive; just like he'd felt as a young boy near the porch of his grandfather's home when told of his father's death. He could almost smell and feel the tall grass on the hillside that fateful day undulating around him. His body shook as adrenaline coursed through him with reckless abandon. He was about to lose his father again.

George finally pushed apart from him and held him firmly by his shoulders at arms' length, looking deeply into his eyes. "Everything's going to be all right now. I love you, son."

Both said nothing further, their tears blending with the rain. Then George finally released him and turned back to Gast just as one of the imperial warriors

thrust a bat'leth into his hands, locking eyes with him as he did so, gazing at him with newfound respect.

Another more timid Imperial hesitated, then offered another bat'leth to Gast, who regarded it briefly before he snatched it away. He held it up in his gloved hands and ran his eyes over its length from one pointed tip to the other as beads of rain streamed down its crescent-shaped blade.

The crowd of imperial and rebel soldiers drew back, creating a wide circle. Two of the Imperials pulled James along and held him firmly between them.

George and Gast stood facing one another in the center, holding their bat'leths at the ready as those relentless torrents of wind-blown rain continued to intensify around them.

Hatred flared in Gast's eyes as he raised his bat'leth high over his head and with a loud cry of rage swung it down furiously toward George's head. But George had expected his attack and quickly countered, raising his own bat'leth high to meet Gast's in a ringing clash of metal and an explosion of bright orange sparks that cascaded to the rain drenched deck of the landing platform as they backed away from each other and raised their blades across their bodies, ready to defend.

In the wail of gale-force winds and the smash of steel and cascading sparks, everyone watched the two enemies locked in full-on mortal combat as the last traces of James' tears mixed with the stinging rain and streamed down over his face. He couldn't help his father.

Gast stepped in and swung again, laterally at chest height. George deflected the blow in another ringing clash of metal and cascade of sparks, then countered with a sweeping upward undercut that barely missed Gast's midsection as he stepped back from it, nearly losing his balance.

"pIqaD!" he heard a voice roar over the storm's din.

Everyone, even his father and Gast, paused and looked toward the voice.

Then, as the far end of the circle surrounding the combatants parted, he saw what the commotion was all about. Prath and several of his officers stepped into the circle as a large contingent of his soldiers swelled the ranks that had formed it. Prath held a weapon very similar to the bat'leths in its design—a more ornate bat'leth that was obviously older, which he held down but ready as he strode purposefully toward the combatants.

"I am Prath, son of Arkanon of the house of Arkanon!" he proclaimed in fluent, albeit heavily accented English. "I claim first right of vengeance!"

Great. The two individuals who most wanted his father dead were both within striking distance of realizing their shared desire. Could things possibly get any worse?

"Yes! Vengeance is yours! I stand aside!" Gast's voice almost sounded relieved.

Prath stepped slowly forward between him and George Kirk. George stole a quick close look at Prath's weapon and recognized it and the emblem emblazoned on its blade immediately—the emblem of the House of Arkanon. That weapon had been passed down from father to son for generations.

A nervous Gast flinched almost imperceptibly as Prath raised his bat'leth high over his head, but rather than strike, Prath swung his bat'leth straight down and struck the deck, breaking the weapon at its center into two pieces. Everyone was shocked and motionless in the relentless gale. Prath turned to George and dropped the half he still held to clatter to the deck.

"The house of Kirk is no longer my enemy!" he spoke in a normal tone, and like a sudden shift in the relentlessly driving wind, a chorus of shock and surprise resounded through the gathered ranks. Everyone was in shock.

Then Prath raised the data module high for all to see. "I am Prath!" he repeated, addressing them all as he turned. "I am the son of Kalor Arkanon of the house of Arkanon! This belonged to my father! On it is proof he uncovered of Gast's treachery against the empire!" He pointed an accusing finger at his now former mentor. "He is the one—the orchestrator of my father's death! He has betrayed us all!"

"Lies!" Gast finally sneered, incensed and insane with fury.

"You ordered my father's shuttle sabotaged! You made me believe…made all Klingons believe…that my father's friend, George Kirk, had betrayed and murdered him! You have no honor!

Gast spun on the officer in charge of his personal guard, who had the misfortune of being the warrior standing closest to him, and ordered, "Arrest General Prath at once!"

Some of Gast's imperial guards anticipated their commanding officer's reply and started moving in obedience toward Prath, but when the officer raised his hand to halt them they stopped immediately, clearly vexed, their hesitant gazes bouncing first amongst themselves and then back and forth between their commanding officer and their chancellor.

No one else moved. Gast stepped forward himself, obviously realizing that his life was at stake.

Two of Prath's warriors quickly stepped in front of him to block his way, and when he raised his bat'leth between them, one of them snatched it away from him while the other placed a hand on his chest and held him fast.

"This is treason!" Gast shouted angrily.

"No! This is treason!" Prath countered with hatred burning in his eyes as he held the data module up in his face.

"Your mind has been polluted Prath! I did what I had to do—what had to be done—for all Klingons! You do not understand!"

"I understand everything!" Prath rasped.

Gast lunged toward the soldier standing nearest to him, grabbed his pistol before he could do anything about it. Then he turned it on Prath, but before he could fire every warrior on the landing deck leveled his weapon at him, including his own imperial guard.

Gast hesitated for a moment, then threw the pistol to the deck in disgust and fury, "There can be no peace as long as one Earther remains alive! I am not alone, Prath! Many believe as I do! Their numbers are greater than you realize!"

Prath turned back to George and laid a hand over one of George's, both of which still tightly clutched the bat'leth he'd been given. "The house of Arkanon and the house of Kirk stand together as one."

George locked eyes with his old friend's son as tears welled up and mixed with the rain. He loosed his grip and let Prath take the bat'leth from him, then accepted the data module from him. "Your father saved my life," he told him. "He died honorably and his story is my story, and your story, and our children's story, and their children's story, for all time."

"My Lord!" Corba shouted, stepping forward suddenly with his communicator open in his hand. "Our fleet is under attack!"

"Yes! It is a good day to die!" Gast spitefully proclaimed as his words came with the spit and rain that ran across his face.

Prath turned back on Gast. "Perhaps, but not for you." He turned his attention to the soldiers flanking the chancellor. "Take him below and lock him up!"

"No!" Gast protested, roaring over the howling wind as the soldiers grabbed him by the arms. "I have been challenged, Prath! One of us must die!"

"You will fall unknown, alone and forgotten…and without honor."

Gast cut loose in a relentless angry tirade of Klingon curses as the soldiers holding him in custody manhandled him away.

Prath turned to George again. "We must put a stop to this madness, Kirk."

The ear-splitting high-pitched whine of an unseen vessel's engines stabbed through the storm's fury and drowned out George's reply. Then a bird-of-prey suddenly wavered into view high above and to one side off the landing platform. It swooped low angled its stern in over the deck's edge, then hovered there as its boarding ramp descended.

Prath's troops frantically leveled their weapons at the ramp, perhaps suspecting the ship's arrival to be a countermove—part of a back-up plan their chancellor might have put into place.

"No!" James shouted, jumping in and waving his hands to warn them off as Mitchell clomped down the metal ramp, grasping one of the bottom supports to steady himself against the wind. "They're with me!"

"I will order an immediate cease-fire, Prath said firmly before adding in a warning tone. "But some may not stand with me."

"Do what you can," George said. And then, in what was perhaps the last moment the two former enemies turned allies would ever share, they clasped one another's forearms. But before George could say his farewell, the old white-haired rebel Klingon soldier stepped up to them and pounded his fist against his chest in salute.

"Prath, son of Arkanon of the house of Arkanon, we stand with you," he proclaimed, apparently speaking for all of the rebels.

"It has begun," George said, a look of resolve on his face as he locked gazes with Prath.

"Indeed it has," Prath affirmed, nodding in approval with a newfound respect for the brave band of brothers who had risked death and dishonor for his father.

"Qapla'," George said with resolve to his new ally.

"Good luck," Prath replied. And with that he spun on his heel and led with his soldiers and staff off toward Gast's transport and the other ships.

"Let's go, Dad!" James shouted as his father turned back to him. James wasted no time and led the way through the raging wind and rain toward the ramp.

With a pleading expression on his face, Mitchell shrugged and gestured impatiently as they drew close. Then he suddenly recognized the older man accompanying his best friend aboard and remarked, "Oh, God."

"What are you doing here? I thought I told you to get back to Earth!" James shouted at Mitchell.

"Enterprise was already on the other side of the wormhole when we got there."

"Dad, you remember Gary Mitchell," James said.

"Yes I do," George responded as he continued on by.

Mitchell flipped his communicator open. "Go Ross!"

Over the wind-driven rain and the whine of the engines right before the ramp closed flush with the hull and sealed securely beneath him.

The hull creaked as the gale-force winds buffeted the ship, but all things considered Ross did a pretty decent job of holding the ship steady as Gary followed James and his father in lock-step up the long narrow corridor to the bridge doors, which slid open to reveal Ross engaged in pitched battle with the helm controls.

"Enterprise came?" James asked, interrupting just as his father had.

"Enterprise, Lexington, and Yorktown!"

"Yorktown?" James shot back. Gary obviously had no idea Annie was even aboard her.

"Reckless, Dad. What you did out there. Really reckless," James admonished his father as he turned and went for center seat without giving it a second thought, feeling the ship's inertia push against him as Ross sharpened its incline and accelerated through the clouds. "Gary, I need a channel opened to our fleet right away."

"Thought you might," Mitchell responded as he stepped over to the rear communications console, fell into the seat, and started tinkering with the controls.

He turned to his father. "So that was your big plan all along then?" he asked. "Lure Gast here? Challenge him and maybe die in the process? Just to make us safe?"

"And it would have worked too, no matter who won."

"Do you hear yourself talking?"

"Just for the record—I could have taken him," his father half-smiled.

"I don't even know what to say to that," James shook his head in frustration.

The roughness of the flight smoothed as the last traces of storm-churned atmosphere gave way to the darkness of space. James looked out through the forward canopy and immediately spotted what looked like several Klingon battlecruisers battling it out at extreme distance. They appeared to be older designs—mostly D-5s, and two that looked more like first generation D-6s. Brilliant red torpedoes soared and bright green disruptor bolts suddenly began pulsing through the black sky between them, and as they drew closer James realized that the older ships were fully engaged against the newer warships of the Imperial Fleet.

"Open a channel to Enterprise," James asked.

"Channel open," Mitchell reported.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk to Enterprise!" James immediately called out.

A few moments later a portion of the front viewport flickered and then filled with static that quickly coalesced into an image of Captain Pike sitting in the center of his bridge, the chaos of battle surrounding him. "Kirk?" he asked as his face filled the screen.

"Sir, there are several Klingon transports enroute to the imperial fleet. One one of them is General Prath. You need to make sure he gets through. Do not attack them. I repeat, do not attack them."

"Why not?" Pike shot back.

"He's going to order his fleet to stand down," George answered, stepping forward as he spoke directly to Pike, who instantly recognized him.

"Good Lord," Pike all but whispered, but was all business again. "Understood."

"Captain," George continued, "what's the status of our forces?" Pike started to answer, but Admiral T'Pol suddenly stepped in beside him and he fell silent. "Admiral T'Pol," George acknowledged as the two of them locked eyes. "It is good to finally see you face-to-face again."

"Likewise," she replied with a nod.

Pike continued. “Enterprise and Lexington have sustained only minor damage. Rebel Klingon ships have taken a fifty-percent loss. I’m afraid Yorktown is lost. Captain Archer ordered everyone evacuated. We’re picking up the escape pods now.”

James’ eyes grew wide as he took in the news.

CHAPTER 75

Yorktown

"Yorktown warp core temperatures rising out of control!" George Kirk announced, interpreting what he was hearing through his earpiece. "Captain Archer has ordered general order thirteen…most of the crew has already been evacuated via the escape pods…the core will go critical in approximately twenty-minutes."

"Can the core be remote jettisoned?" Ross asked.

"They tried. The both the main and backup systems failed."

Kirk spun to look through the front viewport past his father and past Ross as she piloted Harry's ship down on *Yorktown* from above. The severity of her condition was all too obvious.

Slowly tumbling end-over-end against the ocean of atmosphere above the watery world, *Yorktown's* shields had obviously collapsed and she'd taken a hell of a beating. What was left of her charred warp nacelles was offline and dark, with the starboard nacelle twisted and bent just ahead of its pylon where part of its structure had been blown away or vaporized. The explosion mid-nacelle was obviously what started her pitching end-over-end, and the nav thrusters simply could not compensate for it.

The various impact points and other hull breaches were venting everything from debris to sparks to smoke into space. As the vessel tumbled, a ringlike halo had formed, and was leaving a long dissipating trail of crossing loops behind it.

The impulse engines likewise were dark, and what little remained of their emitter vents was twisted and mangled. A gaping hole had been punched through her saucer's starboard-aft quarter between its outer edge and the tri-deck superstruc-

ture, exposing at least four decks to space. The docking port behind the bridge had been destroyed and the bridge dome was completely dark except for sporadic flashes of light from somewhere within, presumably from fires and electrical shorts.

Her hangar bay doors appeared to be jammed not quite all the way open, but the usually invisible atmospheric force-field was pulsating between blue and blue-green—that it was still functioning at all was nothing short of a miracle—making visual assessment of the situation inside impossible.

"Klingon Imperial forces are standing down," George broke in again, and where one might expect cheers, there was only silence as everyone beheld the wounded *Yorktown*. Several gashes and dozens of smaller wounds marred and blackened her weathered hull, some of them open to damaged decks within, others glowing from fires burning out of control beneath them, and as James sat transfixed in the center seat, the idea that Annie might still be somewhere aboard that ship formed a lump in his throat that made it difficult for him to breathe. No, not that she might be somewhere aboard. If any of the crew remained, then she was aboard. She would never have left her post while members of her crew remained.

"Scan for life signs," Kirk told him as he came over to huddle with him. Behind him, Mitchell had been working at another console.

"I have about a dozen remaining crew on the hanger deck. Apparently the last shuttle was damaged in the explosion." He paused as he pressed his fingers to his earpiece and listened for a moment. "The evacuation chief reports Captain Archer is still on the bridge—correction—trapped on the bridge—with her exec—but they've lost contact them."

Kirk's stomach hollowed out and he felt a rush of adrenaline. Annie was trapped on the bridge. "Take us to the emergency docking ring on the bridge," Kirk almost whispered.

"Aye skipper."

Kirk began to steel himself in advance of the harsh reality that Annie was possibly gone already. He felt suddenly shortness of breath, as though his own ribs were

crushing the life out of him. He gazed out at the *Yorktown* and the tumbling scene behind her, he saw in his mind's eye that sunlit glade of trees in those far off woods he'd known so long ago, and the beautiful young freckle-faced girl he'd fallen in love with as a boy—that he was still in love with now.

"Bad news, Jim," Mitchell announced as he came over. "Harry's docking collar isn't Federation-standard. Not even close."

"What about the transporter in the cargo hold?" Kirk suddenly remembered how Harry had made his great escape earlier.

"Too much ambient radiation. Patterns would be compromised." Ross' words from across the room immediately quashed that idea.

"Can we turn one of the evacuation shuttles back around? Or have Enterprise or Lexington send in one of theirs?"

George shook his head. "All evac shuttles all landed, and Enterprise and Lexington are too far away now. A shuttle wouldn't get here in time, much less retreat to a safe distance before the core explodes."

James turned to face front just in time to see *Yorktown's* saucer fill the forward viewport. Nearly a quarter of its upper hull from just ahead of the port running light to about ten degrees to starboard was gone—blown completely away, except for those burned and twisted pieces of plating that still clung to the ship's frame. The leading edge of the superstructure beneath the bridge had been pulverized, and that of the bridge itself had been badly damaged—blackened by weapons fire and gashed from its base nearly two-thirds of the way up to the scanner array. The whole thing reminded him of the cross-section design graphics he'd studied so carefully back at the academy. But this was no clean cut-away graphic. This was a real starship with a real crew, broken and battered. And sadly, judging from the beating the bridge had apparently taken, any lingering trace of hope that Annie might still be alive was likely hope wasted.

"Jim, if there was anybody alive on that bridge," Gary began hesitantly, "just the radiation alone…"

James knew that he had to accept the situation and move forward. The bridge was lost and so probably was Annie. There were, however, still survivors on the hanger deck. They still had a chance to make it home, and he was damn well going to make sure they did just that. "Ross, take us back to the hangar deck," he ordered firmly. Let's get those people out."

"Aye, Skipper." With the auto-nav still holding them in lock step with the doomed ship, the devastated saucer swept past beneath the viewport as Ross flew them down between the dead nacelles. Then, as she swung the ship around and descended toward the hanger deck, James noticed that the LSO's window had been shattered, exposing the entire compartment to space, and that the portside clamshell door lay slightly canted, having been dislodged from its track most likely by the badly damaged shuttlecraft laying on its side against it.

Everyone gazed down onto the leading edge of the shuttle landing strip where several of the ship's crew gathered—perhaps eight or nine, with two lying on the deck having their injuries tended to.

What had obviously been a major fire had left in its wake a scorched bay littered with the charred remains of three more shuttles that hadn't made it out in time. Two of them were obviously total losses, having sustained extensive heat exposure and severe hull damage that could only have been caused by a series of powerful explosions ripping through the hangar all around them. James didn't even want to think about the agonizing deaths the poor souls inside must have suffered. The third one didn't appear to be too badly damaged, though its hull had obviously been showered by burning debris. Judging from the damage to the portside aft deck, the first one they had seen—the one that had been thrown against the hangar door—apparently had been torn from its moorings.

Perhaps most unnerving of all, a single copper-orange environmental suit helmet tumbled out of the hangar bay and drifted closely by the viewport, then disappeared from view. James could only hope that it had been blown out of a storage locker and not off of some unfortunate crewman's shoulders. Finally, in addition to the fire and the wrecked shuttlecrafts and all the scattered debris…and that lone helmet, one of the portside observation deck's windows had blown out and those

lights that hadn't already failed completely were flickering like flashes of distant Iowan heat lightning on a hot summer night.

A loud and persistent beeping sounded in George's earpiece. He pressed the earpiece into to his ear and listened for a moment, then said, "Yorktown's evac chief. They see us. She also confirms they've reestablished the hangar deck containment field."

"Time to core failure?" Kirk asked.

Ross looked back over her shoulder at him. "Thirty-three minutes," she estimated. "Maybe thirty-four."

"Are they pulling away?" Gary interrupted, sounding utterly perplexed, his eyes glued to the viewport.

"Someone just fired Yorktown's maneuvering thrusters," Ross reported as the starship momentarily drifted until the auto-nav synced with it again.

"Tell them to stop!" Mitchell barked an order. "It's going to be hard enough to land as it is." Mitchell turned to Kirk, "We are talking about landing, right?"

"Yorktown evac chief! Stop firing your maneuvering thrusters." George commanded with urgency, yet still with an air of calm professionalism. "Say again, null your maneuvering thrusters!" He listened for a few seconds, then said, "I didn't get that, Yorktown, say again." He listened for another moment, then told James, "I don't know if it's us or them or the radiation or what, but I can't…wait —she just confirmed no—she just repeated definitely no. They aren't firing the thrusters."

"Well *someone* is."

"Maybe their auto-pilot system is compromised?" Mitchell suggested.

"Not possible," Ross claimed. "Built-in fail-safes prevent auto-pilot from initiating erroneous solutions. It would just shut down."

"And now they're firing again."

"Well who the hell's doing it and why?" James snapped.

"Wait…speed is increasing." Time to atmosphere is down to twenty-six-minutes."

"Someone's trying to scuttle her," George figured it out, sounding certain. "Whoever it is firing those thrusters knows that if they can burn her up in the atmosphere before the core breaches, there will be no explosion."

"From how many places can those thrusters be fired?" Mitchell asked.

"Three," Ross answered immediately, "Main and aux engineering—" Then she turned to them. "…and the bridge."

"Main and aux engineering are completely destroyed," Mitchell stated with certainty.

James looked back out at the *Yorktown*. "Someone's still alive up there."

"Jim, you saw the damage," Mitchell offered hesitantly.

"I agree," his father said, surprising him.

"Get us on that hanger deck, Ross," James ordered with renewed resolve and urgency.

"We need to get everybody in there into E-V suits," George updated what he was hearing on his earpiece.

"Why?" Kirk asked.

"Only one air curtain emitter is online. There's a risk we'll compromise it and depressurize the entire hanger deck when we push through to land," he began, then realized a little more was necessary to get his point across. "The whole theory behind emitter redundancy is that each emitter basically fills in the holes missed by another. I'd have Ross explain the quantum physics but there's no time."

"We can match the frequency of our deflectors with frequency of the hanger deck air curtain, then draw it with us when we land," Ross proposed.

"Do it," Kirk ordered.

George pressed the earpiece into his ear. "Yorktown evac chief," he hailed. When he received only static in response, he repeated, "Yorktown evac chief, do

you copy?" After another moment of listening, he proceeded. "Be advised, you need to move everyone back away from the landing zone and into the airlock, copy? I say again, clear the landing zone and get everyone into the airlock." He listened for another moment, then pulled the earpiece from his ear and said, "They copy."

"Let's get it done. Stations," James ordered.

Mitchell dropped into the Comms station chair. George took the co-pilot's seat to Ross' right, while James returned to the center seat.

"Sir," Ross turned to the legend next to her. "I've put deflector control on manual. You need to monitor and adjust it as the hanger deck forcefield frequency fluctuates."

"Got it," George answered confidently as he laid his hands on the console.

"They're ready," Mitchell called out.

Ross pressed the lone control just above the center of the console. The inset cover just below it slid open and a manual control yoke rose up and locked into position. She grasped it firmly and disengaged the auto-station-keeping, then started making constant minor adjustments.

"Ready," she said.

"You got this, Ross," Mitchell offered from across the room.

Ross turned back to briefly lock eyes with Mitchell, who offered her what might constitute a half-smile. She returned it in kind, then she turned back.

"Go," James simply instructed.

Ross adjusted her grip on the yoke with both hands. "Raise shields."

George complied and confirmed, "Shields up. Frequencies matched."

Ross gently pushed the yoke forward. The ship moved with surprising grace. Ross had become quite the expert in the brief time she'd piloted it.

"Contact in three, two, one…" Ross ticked off as the ship got closer to the threshold of the hanger deck.

"Hanger field integrity holding," George reported as he watched something on the console.

"Grappling magnets," Ross announced as she activated another control on the flush smooth surface of the console. "Secure and holding."

"Lower shields," Ross turned to George as she said it.

"Shields…down," George returned as he gently dragged his forefinger across the console toward him, "Hanger field integrity holding steady. Hanger deck pressure at one-zero-seven millibars and dropping. Estimate forty-six minutes to danger levels."

Kirk turned to Mitchell, "Time to core breach and atmospheric entry?"

"About twenty-five and a half minutes for the core," Mitchell answered as he threw off his harness and stood up. "Just under twenty-seven to the atmosphere." He looked across in Ross' direction. "Comms transferred to the helm station."

"Open dorsal hatch." James spun back to his father. "Dad, you get those people aboard," he ordered as though he were addressing one of his crew. "Gary and I are going for the bridge."

"Aye, Skipper," his father answered, briefly surprising his son for a moment as he stood and headed toward the starboard side of the bridge.

"Ross, if we're not back here in twenty-minutes, take off. Got it?"

"Aye, Skipper."

Kirk followed Mitchell and his father to the starboard bulkhead as a series of loud snaps fired off in rapid succession above them. A metallic cranking sound and a gust of outrushing air followed panel slid aside and a ladder deployed from the wall from where it had been flush before.

Following behind his father and Mitchell, James grabbed the highest rung he could reach and clambered up the ladder through the crawlway to the open hatch behind them. The heat hit him as soon as he poked his head through the opened armored airlock hatchway—the heat, and the smell.

Traces of flash-burned bulkhead materials, hull coating, thruster fuel, cargo containers, and sadly, even human flesh assaulted his nostrils and made the terror that *Yorktown's* crew had faced that much more real for him as he descended toward the scarred and blackened deck. He realized immediately that he should have expected that—plasma fires burned at several thousand degrees and affected everything they touched to some degree, even materials specifically designed to withstand them—but somehow he doubted that prior expectations could have prepared him any more adequately.

He spotted his father and Mitchell climbing down the outer rungs of the access steps to the floor. He followed, skipping the last few rungs and dropped to the deck. He wiped his sleeve across his sweat-coated forehead as he watched Mitchell and his father scurry off into action, managing the evacuation.

Through the open bay doors of the hanger deck, stars rushed by as though they were falling snow. Only the large blue-green world of Rejetti sweeping by reminded Kirk he was on a doomed starship tumbling out of control.

"Captain!" The anxious *Yorktown* deck officer, a lieutenant commander, his uniform soaked with sweat and blackened with soot, rushed toward him.

"Someone's still alive up on the bridge!" James yelled to him.

"That's impossible!" the deck officer coughed in protest, "Every access is blocked! I sent two teams!"

"What about through the elevator tubes?"

"Elevators are inoperative! The entire system is down!"

One of the starboard observation deck's largest windows suddenly exploded ahead of a wall of orange-white flames that roared across the top of the bay and then quickly burned itself out, showering the deck with a thousand shards of aluminum-glass, forcing everyone to raise their arms over their heads to shield themselves from the deadly shards raining down on them.

As the smoke and debris cleared, Kirk caught sight of a *Yorktown* crewmen—a woman in an environmental suit minus helmet and gloves, manhandling another

injured crewman toward the ship. Then his eyes fell on an empty anti-grav gurney on the deck nearby. Kirk grabbed the deck officer by the shoulders.

"Get your people aboard!" Then he left the deck officer and ran over to the gurney. "Gary!" he shouted as he started checking its systems. "Grab another one of these gurneys and follow me!"

James sprinted off, pushing his hovering gurney ahead of him toward and into the starboard corridor.

Mitchell found another gurney that had somehow been spared the worst of the devastation. He powered it up and shut off the lateral inhibitors as it rose up off the deck just as George ran up beside him to help.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"With you!" George gesturing toward the ship.

"The hell you are!"

"I am!" George stated firmly.

"No sir!" Mitchell refused, putting a hand on George's shoulder.

"We don't have time for this!" George pushed his hand away.

Before he realized what he was doing, Mitchell grabbed his phaser from his belt and leveled it at the George.

"You're *not* coming!" he threatened as George stared at him in shock. "I saw what losing you did to Jim and I'll be damned if I'm going to risk that happen again!"

"It won't happen again!" George shouted angrily.

"You're right! It won't!"

George tried to step around him yet again, Mitchell straightened his arm, raising the phaser higher and stopping him in his tracks once more. "Damn it, Mister Mitchell! Let me pass!"

"No, sir! I will not!" Mitchell insisted. "So with all due respect, sir, get your legendary ass aboard that ship now or I swear I'll stun you into the middle of next week!"

Mitchell wasn't bluffing and George could plainly see it in his unwavering glare. He could have kept on arguing with him, but they simply didn't have the time, and the truth was that he respected the young man's loyalty to his captain—his friend and his son.

Mitchell must have seen something in the old man's eyes because he suddenly lowered the phaser.

"You've done enough. Don't you think it's time to come home? To your family? Don't they deserve at least that much after everything you've put them through?" He hooked the phaser onto his belt, retrieved his gurney, then paused once more and briefly locked eyes with the old man. "You do whatever the hell you want," he said, then grabbing the gurney, George reached and gripped his shoulder.

"You bring me my son back. I'll be here."

"Yes, sir." Mitchell's tone was firm and confident, then he turned and broke into a full sprint toward the starboard corridor with the gurney.

CHAPTER 76

Stars in the grass

"The doors should be open now," Pike cut back in again just as the release engaged. The doors to *Yorktown's* bridge slipped a few inches apart, sucking through it a thin swirling stream of smoke from the shaft. Various alert klaxon's and the sounds of other warning bleeps and buzzers, along with and the snapping and spitting and sparking of damaged circuitry, filled the shaft with a cacophony of noises.

Kirk closed and put his communicator back on his belt. Then, followed by Mitchell, both pulled themselves through into the alcove and started unstrapping themselves from their gurneys. As Kirk pushed away from his gurney, he noted that his feet did not touch the floor. Neither did Gary's and both immediately reached for something to hold onto to avoid floating off.

"Artificial gravity has failed," Gary stated the obvious.

Both also noted that the transparent aluminum bridge dome had been switched to transparent mode, and every fifteen seconds or so, the gigantic blue-green orb of Rejetti swept majestically overhead, followed by stars, then Rejetti again—over and over.

"Hello!" Kirk shouted as the acrid smoke started stinging his eyes and making them water. He coughed as the odor of burned circuitry assaulted his nostrils and filled his lungs. "Annie?" He wished he still had the respirator he'd had down on the planet.

"Up here!" a woman's voice—but not Annie's—shouted back from above. Only then did Kirk notice that there were two dark silhouettes nestled above them, high against the center of the transparent dome.

Chills of adrenaline surged through Kirk's body. One was Captain Archer and the other was Annie. He braced his feet against the floor and pushed off to propel himself up into the dome. Gary followed.

Kirk floated up to find Captain Archer. She was wearing a copper-orange emergency evac suit but not the helmet, which was attached to her utility belt. Annie was not wearing an E-V suit, but seemed to be pressed with her back against the bridge dome.

"You can't move her!" Archer shouted as she grabbed Kirk's arm firmly. "The dome's cracked. You move her, the whole thing blows out."

The epic tone of Archer's voice hit him squarely in the chest. She pointed to a spider web of cracks in the transparent aluminum dome that converged behind Annie's back. Horror swept Kirk's face when his gaze fell on something else. A loose piece of damaged railing had somehow impaled her in her mid-section, and one would assume straight through her and the transparent aluminum of the dome behind her back. He turned to look Archer straight in her face and her eyes betrayed the obvious, but as if just to make sure, she slowly shook her head.

"She's not in pain. I took care of that," Archer spoke softly. "I was going to stay with her until the end."

James' heart fell into his stomach. He stared at her for a moment, then spun his eyes back on Annie as Gary hovered next to them. Then he turned and pulled himself upward, close to Annie's face.

"Is she—" Gary whispered to Archer.

"She's still holding on. I don't know how."

"What happened?" Gary asked as both looked on.

"We took an unshielded hit to the dome. She was sucked up—along with that piece of railing. She's all that's holding the atmosphere in. She gave the bridge crew time to get out."

Kirk couldn't hear the whispers behind him, but he could hear Annie's slow, shallow breathing. She appeared calm, but her eyes were unfocused until she noticed him.

"Look…at you," her voice was more raspy than usual, like a strained whisper, and as he looked at her a little too long, her aquamarine eyes pooled with tears.

"Don't…you fret,…M'sieur Marius…" Her dry voice cracked as she did her best to sing the words from Les Misérables.

Then his eyes pooled with tears too. "Annie," he said softly as he gently brushed her hair out of her eyes and then caressed the sides of her bloodied, soot-stained face. Each time Rejetti swept by outside the dome, it would bathe her face from one side to the other a pale blue. Her skin felt clammy beneath his hands. Tears flowed from the corners of her aquamarine eyes as she stared blankly into the distance. He recognized a familiar freckle he'd known all his life, just below and to the side of her right eye.

Her lips were beginning to turn blue. "Annie…" His said again, his voice croaking, either from the smoke and dust, or from the crushing emotions.

Gary turned to Archer with a look of urgency on his face. "Captain, your core is going to—"

"Explode. Yes, I know," she finished for him. "It was her idea. Accelerate and scuttle the ship in the atmosphere before the core exploded—let the planet absorb the shock—save the fleet and the evac shuttles. Then we got hit again."

"We've got a problem" Mitchell said in a lower than normal tone. "The saucer-sep system just failed and locked off all turbo shafts. There's no way back to the hanger deck. We have to find another way out."

"I was going to blow the dome—get out that way once she—" she cut herself off.

Mitchell glanced down at Kirk, then pulled out his communicator and flipped it open. "Ross, this is Mitchell. Take off. Get out of here now. We're getting out another way." He flipped his communicator shut before Ross could respond.

"Help me get two more suits from the emergency locker by the elevator." Archer said. Both glanced at Kirk as he held Annie, then pushed off and floated down toward the bridge proper.

Kirk didn't even notice Gary and Archer had gone off as he gently stroked Annie's cheek.

"I…can't feel my legs," she whispered as though she was trying to tell him a secret.

"You let me worry about those long gorgeous legs," his voice broke, forcing him to feign clearing his throat afterwards to disguise it.

"You think…you're all that." Annie smiled again. Then her face twisted with a sudden surge of pain as a distant explosion rumbled and rattled the entire bridge. Through the transparent aluminum dome directly behind her, Rejetti was continuing to grow closer and larger as it continued to sweep past every few seconds. He tried not to look at it as it made him somewhat dizzy, but it had the effect of casting a slowly alternating, blue-white strobe over the whole bridge.

"Jim…you have to go…"

"We are—all of us." Kirk's heart heaved as he knew he was lying to her. She was not going to live much longer. He hated himself.

Archer and Mitchell floated up beside Kirk and Annie again. Mitchell now wore a similar orange E-V suit and was holding his helmet and gloves. Archer carried another emergency evac suit along with another helmet and pair of gloves.

"Gary," Annie rasped loudly as she saw him, struggling to raise her voice—but she simply didn't have the strength.

"I'm here, Annie," Mitchell responded firmly as he propelled himself slightly closer. "I'm right here."

"Get him…out of here."

An unexpected flood of emotions suddenly ambushed Mitchell and tears welled up in Gary's eyes.

Annie smiled at him. “See? I knew…you liked me.” She turned her aquamarine eyes back on Kirk. “Jim?”

“I’m here, Annie. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere” He leaned closer and felt her short, warm, forced breaths against his face. She tried put her hand to the side of his face again, but he had to reach up and hold it there for her, as she didn’t have the strength to do it herself. He caressed her hand and pressed it to his face.

“Yes you are love.” She whispered as she gazed into his eyes. “Second star…to the right…”

Such a mix of kindness and sadness filled her eyes as more tears streamed from her eyes and spread on her cheeks. She managed to smile for him—a smile that washed over him with the radiance and warmth of a summer sunset.

“And straight on ’til morning.” Kirk’s voice broke hard as he forced a smile.

Her eyes lost focus and after a moment, she smiled at infinity and whispered with wonder.

“Stars…in the grass…”

Her smile faded, he felt her hand go limp in his. Her eyes lost their focus as she exhaled her last breath slowly.

“No,” he whispered.

She was gone.

Annie.

Archer waited as long as she dare, but a quick glance out through the viewport at the planet looming below prompted her to speak firmly and plainly. “We’re out of time.”

“Come on, Jim,” Mitchell said softly as he reached down for him.

“No!” Kirk smacked his hand away, his eyes pooled with tears. He looked back at Gary and met his eyes, which were also glistening.

“We have to go, Jimmy.”

Kirk knew it deep down but somehow his body just wouldn't respond.

Mitchell reached again and took him by an arm while Archer took hold of the other one as more explosions somewhere deep in the bowels of the ship shook the deck beneath them. Or maybe it was his heart.

Annie's lifeless hand slipped from his. He didn't want to let go. He resisted but finally let Gary and Archer pull him to float beside them.

They wasted no time quickly manhandling him into the E-V suit while Kirk simply stared at Annie's lifeless face, her body pressed against the dome.

Another, much more thunderous and violent explosion rocked the ship and nearly threw them all off balance. Numerous cracks appeared across both levels, spawning divergent branches that split off and joined with one another as they spread across…everything. The smoke and fog that had been gathering around Annie and swirling about as it slowly seeped out through the fissure behind her suddenly shifted and formed new spiraling patterns as it started crawling out through the largest of those cracks with a loud howling whistle.

The entire room began to shake continuously, and the cracks in the deck below them continued spreading toward the bridge's perimeter. Mitchell and Archer became frantic as they finished yanking Kirk into his E-V suit.

"Helmet!" Archer yelled, and Mitchell picked up and slammed it down over Kirk's head, and quickly pressed a button causing the helmet to suck down and seal with a high-pitched squeal of air. Archer had already done the same with her helmet as Mitchell put his on and sealed it and all turned to face forward toward the viewport…and Annie.

Archer lifted the small remote she'd taken off the floor and flipped a small cover off the end, revealing a small red button. She locked eyes with Mitchell.

"Enterprise! This is Archer! We're blowing the dome now!" she called into her helmet comms.

Kirk's gaze was locked onto Annie's distant gaze. She looked surprisingly at peace as she lay against the spectacular vista of Rejetti and the stars. Suddenly he

pushed forward and threw his thick space suit arms around her limp body and held her tight. He wasn't going to just let her sail off into space—not alone.

Archer jammed her other glove finger down onto the button and there was a bright flashing as small rotating orange and white beacons running the entire circumference below the dome lit up and began to strobe.

Then a tremendous force hit from behind as the entire dome assembly shot away into space and he and Annie along with it, as the transparent aluminum dome itself broke into several crescent shaped pieces around them.

Kirk felt Annie's body pulling relentlessly free of his embrace as they tumbled together through the dust and debris glittering all around them. Despite his best efforts to hold onto her, he could feel her slipping from his arms as they sailed high overhead what was left of Yorktown's saucer as it tumbled in descent over the hazy blue horizon of Rejetti and the sprawling Milky Way galaxy behind it.

He could see the first reddish burning glow on the leading edges of *Yorktown* as it began to scrape the atmosphere. Numerous small explosions burst through the back of *Yorktown's* saucer and tore a gash down the length of her dorsal. Her starboard warp nacelle support strut buckled, then tore away from the engineering hull, exposing several more decks to open space. She was starting to break up in earnest as it plummeted into the upper atmosphere.

Plumes of blue and orange flame burst forth and formed a blazing jellyfish-like membrane streaming around it, with the ship itself becoming little more than an indistinct silhouette within it.

His arms ached, every sinew burned as he strained to hold onto Annie, but the suit's smooth, thick fabric afforded no friction. Her peaceful face was a mere breath from his own, separated only by the transparent aluminum visor of his helmet. She was so close. He watched the last wisps of water vapor sublime from her nose and mouth. He gazed into her distant, unfocused eyes. They still looked like glacial ice as they had begun to frost over. Her once soft skin had paled to an almost surreal shade of tropical blue ocean water to match her eyes as it froze, covered by tiny luminescent ice crystals that shimmered like diamond dust.

His fingers ached to the point of cramping in his gloves and his biceps were on fire. He just couldn't…

She slipped away.

With her arms spread wide and backlit magnificently by Rejetti's sprawling blue atmosphere, she was an angel falling to earth. From stars in the grass to star-dust.

He could feel his tears spreading across his cheeks and neck as she fell further and further away below him, until she was just a mere speck, at one with a blue world set against the swirl of the Milky Way.

Past her he could see small fiery red streaks starting to puff and glow against the blue blanket of air. *Yorktown*, in her final moments, breaking apart and burning up.

Silence.

"This is Enterprise," Scotty's familiar brogue came over his helmet speaker, breaking the silence. "Stand by. We are energizing transporters now."

Kirk felt his entire body began to tingle with the familiar prickly sensation as the *Enterprise's* transporter beam embraced him.

CHAPTER 77

Enterprise

The bridge elevator doors parted and Archer, Mitchell and Jim Kirk, still wearing their E-V suits, but carrying their helmets with their gloves stuffed inside, strode onto the bridge. Mitchell carried James' helmet.

"Captain?" James turned to notice Admiral T'Pol. "I am sorry for your loss." There was a very un-Vulcan-like expression on T'Pol's face as she looked him in the eyes.

James simply locked gazes with her for a few moments. He saw something familiar in her eyes. Kindness?

T'Pol turned away to face George. "If you will excuse me, I have to check in with Starfleet."

"Of course, Admiral," George half-smiled as he answered. And with that, T'Pol continued into the elevator in which they just arrived, and after turning back toward them, the doors closed.

James stared blankly out through the main viewport at Rejetti's sprawling horizon as all four of them stood just inside the alcove. Only minutes ago he'd been looking out on the same scene from the devastated bridge of the *Yorktown* which, like his own *Farragut*, was no more.

He felt arms around him. His father held him close and tight.

"I'm sorry, son. I'm so sorry."

The universe had balanced the books, James thought. He had his father back but Annie was gone.

His looked upward into the bridge dome. Might that particular place one day not remind him of Annie's last moments in his arms? Would he ever even stand on the bridge of a starship again?

He ached inside and felt as cold and empty as the cavernous dome above. How fast life changes. How impermanent, he thought.

Captain Pike had uncharacteristically stood up from of his chair and had walked over to stand in front of Robin Archer.

"The last of the evac shuttles just landed. We got all of them." Pike offered in a comforting tone.

"Good," she replied.

"You alright?" he asked her.

"I'm fine. I'll be fine."

Pike gestured, and she followed him back to the captain's chair, leaving Kirk, Mitchell, Ross and George.

Archer found a familiar place to stand by her former captain's side. She caught a brief glance and a sad smile from Tyler. There was a bittersweet feeling of homecoming mixed with nostalgia. But Robin Archer would most likely find a new command somewhere. Starfleet was short of qualified captains and they were at war with the Klingons despite Gast's death. Maybe cooler heads would prevail. One can always hope.

Still standing on the upper platform, father and son Kirk started down and over to stand near Pike and Archer. Mitchell realized he was stuck alone in the alcove with Ross and with a brief look at her, he followed after them, leaving her all alone. Mitchell stopped and turned back to her.

"You coming?"

Ross' eyebrows rose and almost too quickly, she started down and fell into pace with Mitchell.

"This doesn't mean we're engaged or anything," Mitchell ruined the moment, but apparently it was enough of a good moment to outweigh Mitchell's remark, because Ross accidentally let a slight smile escape. Soon they were standing to the left of George, Jim and Archer.

"Bob April told me stories about you and Robau and your Academy days," Pike half-smiled at the legend standing beside him.

"Rich Robau had a flair for somehow not getting blamed for the trouble he talked others into," George replied.

Distant from the ongoing conversation, Jim Kirk's gaze was on the sapphire world through the front viewport, and the distant Milky Way galaxy behind it.

The elevator doors swished open and a middle-aged man wearing a chief medical officer's uniform strode in and made his way purposefully over to Pike, briefly noting the crowd gathered at his side.

"I've got a preliminary medical report on the rescued Yorktown crew," he began, drawing a brief but annoyed look from Pike.

"It can wait, Doctor," Pike told him dismissively, then looked at George. "Mister bad timing. My new chief medical officer, Doctor Piper."

"Fine. It can wait." Piper backed off graciously and stepped over to speak with Spock, who had also made his way down to find a place near the command chair. He was the X.O. after all.

"I guess things are about to get interesting for you," Pike addressed George.

"The last fifteen years have been interesting enough." George raised his eyebrows and sighed for the first time he could recall. "I'm ready to go home—" he stopped short and looked at Jim. "Wherever that might be."

"Well, it'll keep the historians busy for a while," Pike followed up.

George turned to look at Robin Archer. "I met your grandfather once, you know," George told her with a friendly smile. "It was a brief conversation at the summit. He asked me, 'George? Where's the damn bathroom?'—his exact words."

Archer smiled back at him. “Something to engrave on his statue at the academy.”

Pike became all business again and leaned to his right and tapped the intercom button on his armrest. “Mister Scott, I’d like to go home if you can spare your warp engines.”

“Aye, sir, they’re down here somewhere,” the Scotsman responded before Pike half smiled and closed the intercom.

“Mister Tyler, plot a course for that wormhole.”

“Aye aye, Captain.”

“Incoming message from Aavian, Captain,” the comms officer reported. “It’s Prath.”

“On screen,” Pike ordered.

Everyone turned their attention to the main viewport as a holographic wavered and formed into one of Prath standing in the center of his bridge, flanked on either side by a pair of his senior officers, along with some of the former rebel Klingon officers from Rejetti.

“Kirk,” the Klingon barked.

“Yes?” both Kirks responded simultaneously. Then they glanced at each sheepishly, and then looked back at the screen again.

“Well, it looks like the resistance is in good hands,” George observed.

“Indeed, George Kirk,” Prath confirmed. “It seems I have been on the wrong side of history.”

“Where will you go? That wormhole isn’t exactly a secret anymore.”

“To the small galaxy you Earthers call Sagittarius,” Prath came back immediately, as though he already had a specific destination in mind.

“The Sagittarius Dwarf Elliptical Galaxy,” Spock clarified to no-one in particular, although everyone looked at him briefly.

"Bit of a trek from here," George told Prath.

"We may not get there in my lifetime, but we will get there. We will begin again. We will live the way my father meant us to live."

"Your father would be proud. Best of luck to you, Prath."

Prath stood up from his seat.

"George Kirk. You were my father's friend. I am his son. I am your friend. I am your son's friend." Prath slapped his fist to his chest and barked, "Today is a good day—to live!"

Rejetti's horizon replaced Prath's image as it dissolved away.

"Helm," Pike called out. "Best speed for that wormhole."

"Aye, sir. max-warp," the helmsman confirmed.

"Punch it," Pike ordered, and in the next moments the warp engines' distant hum rose to its crescendo and the stars stretched toward them.

George turned and studied his son, and after a few moments looked forward thoughtfully. "Doubt thou the stars be fire; Doubt that the sun doth move; Doubt truth to be a liar."

Jim turned to look at his father. "But never doubt I love," James finished for him.

His father put a hand on his shoulder. James turned and locked eyes with him.

"Hamlet. Act two, scene two," Spock remarked, having overheard.

Mitchell furrowed his eyes suspiciously at the Vulcan. After a moment, he turned his head toward Ross, who was looking right at him.

"What?"

Ross said nothing, and in fact, simply turned and looked forward at the front viewport. After a couple moments Mitchell smiled and pointed at her approvingly. "Very good."

CHAPTER 78

Home

The strong, familiar aroma of wood burning in a fireplace hung in the chilly December air and drew a nostalgic smile to James' face as he walked up the long dirt path past the barn and approached the old family farmhouse's front porch with his father on one side and Gary on the other. His breath formed brief clouds as he exhaled that dissipated quickly. Ahead of them, warm orange light glowed from inside the home through frosted windows, and as they drew closer he began to hear muffled voices rising and falling in joyful conversation and laughter. Despite all that had happened since his last visit barely a week ago, it felt good to be coming home on this particular night, though he'd imagined it differently when his mother had invited Annie to join them. Christmas had always been a bittersweet time.

They climbed the three steps up onto the front porch, their shoes clomping and shuffling across the cold, contracted wooden planks that creaked beneath them. A lone dry Maple leaf skittered across the porch when James shoe knocked it aside.

There was an unplanned, but unanimous hesitation as they closed to a huddle at the front door. Sure, George had already chatted with his mother over subspace and this was no surprise visit, but chatting with someone over a subspace link from light years away was one thing. Face to face was something entirely different.

James raised his hand and balled it into a fist, but before he could knock the door suddenly swung open to reveal a small boy of around seven years old, dressed in denim pants and a wool sweater. The boy looked up at the three men and his eyes and smile grew wide as he shouted excitedly, "Uncle Jimmy!"

"Well hello there, Nicky," James said as he caught the boy in mid leap with a grunt and gave him a hug. "My God, you're growing fast. What are you doing up so late on Christmas Eve?"

"Who is it, Nicky?" a woman's voice asked from somewhere inside.

It had been some time since James had seen his brother Sam, or Aurelan for that matter, but he recognized his sister-in-law's voice immediately.

"It's Uncle Jimmy!" the boy answered louder than he really had to as James put him back down. Then Nicky noticed the older man standing next to his uncle and stared at him, "Who are you?"

George squatted where he stood and smiled at the boy. "I'm your grandfather, Nicky. My name is George."

Nicky furrowed his eyebrows at George. "You don't look like your picture."

"And in fourteen years you won't look like yours either," George replied, chuckling at the boy.

"Well what the hell took you so long?" a very familiar voice asked from just beyond the doorway. James found himself staring into the perpetually-frowning face of Doctor Leonard "Bones" McCoy.

"Bones!" he exclaimed, his face cracking with a big smile as he reached out to embrace his old friend.

"Merry Christmas, Jim." McCoy said and both embraced heartily and patted one another's back. Then, as they parted, McCoy let his hand linger on James' shoulder as a kind expression of knowing sadness swept his face. Neither man said anything. They didn't need to. James knew McCoy was reflecting on Annie's loss, and McCoy knew that he knew it. He simply gave his friend's shoulder a gentle squeeze, and a pat, and that was the end of it.

"Thanks for everything, Bones," James said as he forced himself to smile back at him, though it was a sad smile at best. He had sent McCoy over to the house to break the initial news to his mother. It was a good decision. Despite his always sardonic manner, Bones had a bedside manner second to none, and he trusted him.

"Hey, how often does a doctor get a chance to deliver some good news?" He turned his eyes on Mitchell. "Hello there, Gary," he greeted him politely. Then he glanced past him until his eyes fell on George.

"Dad, this is Leonard McCoy," James quickly introduced him.

"George Kirk," George replied, recalling the name. "Nice to meet you," They shook hands.

"Well don't let in all the cold air, Nicky," Aurelan said as she approached, cradling a newborn infant in her arms. "Hey, Jim." She leaned in for a quick peck on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Aurelan," he said. Then, gazing down at the infant in her arms, he asked, "And just who do we have here?"

"That's my baby brother," Nicky proudly proclaimed from below.

Aurelan smiled down at her son, then answered, "Your newest nephew, Peter." Then she looked at George, offered her hand and said with a welcoming smile, "And you must be Sam's father, George."

"He's my grandfather," Nicky announced proudly.

George shook her hand. "Very nice to meet you, Aurelan."

"What's all the ruckus?" a much older looking Sam asked as he stepped into view behind his wife. Despite McCoy's warning, which his mother had doubtless passed on to the rest of the family, there were simply no words to describe the expression that swept across Sam's face when he saw his father. "Pop?"

Tears began to glisten in George's eyes. "Hi, Sam."

Sam stepped forward and, after a moment's hesitation, embraced his father so tightly that he almost knocked the wind out of him. Tears welled up in Aurelan's eyes as she watched, and it suddenly dawned on James that he'd been so focused on his own emotions regarding his father over the past week that he'd failed to realize just what impact this would have on everyone else.

Then George caught a glimpse of someone else approaching from the living room.

"Well everyone just go ahead and run off," his mother chided them all as she drew closer. "Leave poor Carol sitting all by herself…"

She saw George, froze, and stood there staring at him, shocked into momentary silence as her hand came up and cupped her mouth. Her breathing grew deep and labored and her eyes pooled with tears as her voice dropped to a whisper. "George?"

His voice cracked and as his eyes filled with tears as he replied, "Hi, Win."

"I...wasn't expecting you until tomorrow..."

She took one slow, tentative step forward, staring at him as if she were in some kind of hypnotic trance. The hand that had cupped her mouth slowly reached out to him. She gasped when her fingertips brushed across the skin of his jaw. George reached out and took it into his, drew it back, pressed it to his lips and gently kissed her palm. She stepped closer. He reached up with his free hand and caressed her cheek. She shivered at his touch. He ran his fingers through the hair at her temples, up around her ear and behind her neck.

The moment wasn't lost on anyone as everyone had tears in their eyes.

"You're late," she pretended to chide him as she leaned back to look into his eyes.

"Something came up. I'm sorry," he pretended to make excuses.

Laughing through her tears as she loosed her embrace—George did as well—but kept a grip on her husband's arm and said, "Everyone, please…come inside."

"Who's Carol?" Mitchell asked McCoy as he waited for James' mother to guide his father inside first.

"None of your concern," McCoy admonished firmly, frowning at him.

"It was just a question."

"And that was just an answer."

"He's got somebody anyway," James contributed, tossing Gary a knowing look as McCoy turned and started inside.

"Not only not true," Mitchell began defensively as he fell into step behind Bones. "But just plain mean."

James paused and smiled as he watched them go. The gentle tinkling of the wind chimes to his left caught his attention and he turned and looked up at the porch roof eaves above the steps where they had been hanging since the day they moved there from Iowa so long ago. The thin, tarnished brass Pegasus twisted slowly on the end of its string, its wings eternally unfurled in flight, surrounded by the long thin metal tubes of varying lengths and thicknesses, silhouetted and framed by the brilliant full moon gleaming high above the bare tree-tops in the cold, dark December sky.

He dropped his gaze and hesitated for only a brief moment before he turned and stepped down off the porch. The middle step creaked under his weight like it always did. He stepped off the last one and started down the path. He passed the barn, and continued walking around to stand next to a familiar tree—the tree. The moon bathed its naked leafless branches in dim blue-white light. He pressed his palm against its trunk. The bark felt rough and cold. His eyes followed the trunk up through the bare branches as they scratched and rustled against each other. It seemed somehow smaller and closer to the ground than he remembered.

"I'm going to miss her too," Gary said quietly as he stepped up behind him, giving him a bit of a start.

"I think it's going to snow," James responded after a few moments, changing the subject.

"I've had enough snow, thank you," Gary rebutted.

"It's going to snow," Kirk said with no uncertainty. "You watch."

"Well then we better get inside," Gary said, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Besides I need you to distract McCoy while I talk to this Carol Marcus."

They turned and walked the rest of the way back toward the house in silence. Then, when they stepped back up onto the porch, Gary moved ahead and pulled the door open. “Merry Christmas, Jim.”

James stopped, looked at his friend, and replied, “Merry Christmas, Gary,” then gestured him in ahead of him.

James glanced over at the wind chimes once more. When he saw how Pegasus looked as though he were galloping toward the gleaming orb of the Moon low in the night sky, he half smiled, then stepped inside and shut the door, leaving them tinkling quietly in the chill of the winter breeze.

All was calm. All was bright.