

A Dish Best Served Cold

by

L. B. Colyer

(C) 2019

---- PROLOG ----

Scanning signals from Starbase Ketrige Alpha had detected the rattletrap freighter inching its way through the star system. That it was a very old vessel would have been readily apparent to even an inexperienced space traveler. Its patched and battered hull, though still intact, revealed a history of neglect and abuse. The hull's outer finish had long since given up its smooth, shiny appearance, having been repeatedly punished by debris and high energy particles, and the ship's identifying numbers had faded into dim partial shadows of what they might once have been.

Its hull was strictly utilitarian, rectangular in design and approximately four times wider than its height. Placed in the upper half of its rounded bow was row of narrow viewports which looked out from the vessel's bridge. On each side of the vessel

immediately behind the viewports a dome-shaped structure protruded which housed aiming and discharge grids for the vessel's sometimes functional defensive armament.

On each side of the rear of the hull an ion-driven impulse engine was suspended on a slender swept-back pylon. This design concession to cosmetics could have served to give the freighter an illusion of speed and power had not the afterthought warp drive unit, suspended over the upper hull by an unsightly arrangement of supports and bracing, the power to distract the viewer's eye away from the only pleasing lines of the vessel.

Inside the ship the compartments at the sides of the hull not grudgingly set aside by the Captain for crew functions were designated as cargo holds. All compartments on the inside of the ship were accessed by a single central corridor which ran nearly the entire length of the vessel. The stern end of the central corridor led to the ship's hopelessly cramped engineering compartment, while the forward end opened onto the bridge.

The sweaty, overweight terran who sat in the ship's command chair was smugly congratulating himself on the apparent ease and success of his latest ventures. In fact, nearly everyone who knew anything about his

devious dealings thought of him as a pirate. He preferred to think of himself as a black market merchant.

He was known within his illicit calling by a pseudonym of his own choosing, LeMieux. He was actually the second son of a successful and respected Federation merchant. When his father had passed away his estate had been divided equally between his two sons. The older brother had used his inheritance to start a business of his own. He applied himself diligently using business practices learned from his father, and like his father he reaped success and the respect of his customers and associates.

LeMieux, on the other hand, had never been able to apply himself to any undertaking which required investments of persistence and hard work. He squandered his inheritance on self-indulgent pursuits and dubious schemes and soon found himself with very little money left to his name. Expecting a handout, LeMieux approached his older brother for financial relief. The older brother wisely offered Lemieux a job instead.

Outraged, LeMieux stormed out of his brother's life, profanely vowing that he would never again be in a position where someone could suggest that he should

work his way through life serving someone else. It was near this time in his life when he began referring to himself by his new pseudonym, LeMieux. According to his research it roughly translated as “The Better (one)”, which was how he chose to view himself in relation to his older brother.

He gathered all his remaining assets, and then disappeared. The next time any of LeMieux’s names were spoken in his brother's house was when his brother was visited by Federation authorities who informed him that LeMieux was being sought to answer charges of smuggling and piracy.

LeMieux enjoyed success in his illegal profession, not through any brilliant proficiency, but more through his talents for being recklessly bold and unpredictable. In his own way he amassed a small fortune, but as successful as he was he continually envied his brother's even greater successes. It seemed the only way to force an acknowledgement of his superiority from his older brother was to destroy his business and his reputation. The plan LeMieux devised would require more financial resources than he currently commanded. He had been seeking ways of financing operations against his brother's merchant fleet when the Romulan woman had come into his life.

The Romulan woman had been very secretive,

volunteering little about herself except that she represented interests willing to pay well for transportation of sensitive goods, and above all, discretion. Twice she and LeMieux had negotiated mutually agreeable terms, and LeMieux had been handsomely rewarded for providing her with all she had required. Then when she had visited Lemieux to arrange for a third and final cargo she had insisted on the installation of a new piece of specially modified equipment into his ship. A 'cloaking device' she had called it; something that was guaranteed to hide the ship from Federation surveillance. The greatest problem with the device was its insatiable appetite for the ship's power. With the cloaking device in operation the ship could barely generate enough surplus power to move itself. Therefore the ship's defensive shields and weapons were two options LeMieux would not be able to count on should some unforeseen and undesirable situation develop. LeMieux had protested, but the Romulan woman had been beguilingly reassuring, as she could be when she really wanted something, and LeMieux had needed exactly the amount of money she had offered to pay to implement his scheme against his brother, so the cloaking device had been installed.

And so, thus equipped, they had all come together

for a last trip: LeMieux and his crew - except for the head engineer, who had been detained before their departure by port authorities when he had instigated a brawl over a disputed charge on his barroom tab, the Romulan woman and her precious cargo, and her cloaking device, which LeMieux had just turned on as the woman had instructed when the ship had reached predetermined coordinates.

LeMieux opened a noisy communications channel to her quarters.

"Yes?" the speaker crackled at him, doing its best to convey the woman's response.

"Captain LeMieux here. I just turned on that cloaking thing that you stuffed into my crew's dining area. If it's working, we are now playing hide-and-seek with your Federation friends."

"I'm on my way," she said curtly.

The Romulan woman pressed a wall-mounted button which was supposed to open the door to her quarters. The door actually receded hesitatingly into the wall on the first try, an accomplishment which mildly surprised her. She cautiously checked the outside wall over her door, and then the ceiling, the wall on the opposite side of the corridor, and finally

the deck in the corridor, both ways. She had learned that there was no telling what might be lurking outside the comfort and security of her room.

The Romulan woman felt these precautions were necessary because, as she put it bluntly, LeMieux ran a filthy ship. An innumerable host of insect and vermin life forms lived in corners, crevasses, and crawlways throughout the ship. An amused LeMieux had told her when she had first protested the unsavory conditions that the ship's pest population had at one time grown so large that even his crew had delivered to him an ultimatum that something needed to be done. Rather than lose a crew he was comfortable with, he had allowed them to bring on board a species of arachnoid scavengers to bring the pests under control. LeMieux cared not how many pests she killed, but she was forbidden to harm any of the scavengers.

When satisfied that the corridor to the bridge was free of potentially embarrassing surprises, the Romulan woman strode with determination toward her destination. As she approached the bridge, her eyes were drawn to a discarded, foul-smelling garment lying on the deck against the wall. She stopped to watch as insects of several species scurried frantically away from the garment, startled by a pair of scavengers that were sifting through the folds with

their pincers. The scavengers were surprisingly quick, and were able to capture some of the smaller insects which they were able to swallow in a single gulp.

One of the scavengers lifted a sleeve and exposed a milliped ravenously ingesting the soiled fabric. As the sleeve lifted the milliped turned and hissed fiercely at the scavenger, which jumped back and emitted a surprised screech of its own. The second scavenger, attracted by the cry of the first, scrambled to investigate.

The milliped darted away from the garment, and hugging the base of the wall, headed for a corroded opening in the deck near the engineering end of the corridor. Both scavengers furiously chased after the fleeing milliped, one scurrying between the legs of the Romulan woman. Repulsed and fascinated at the same time, she turned around to watch the end of the unfolding drama of survival.

The milliped was only a meter from the corroded opening when it was startled by a third scavenger emerging from it. The milliped hissed again and ran to the center of the corridor where it was surrounded by the three scavengers. The Romulan woman shivered, seeing that the milliped would be unable to defend itself from three determined predators.

Nonetheless she watched as the scavengers fell upon and devoured their prey. What she saw only further convinced her that LeMieux's stinking pirate raider had become an ecosystem unto itself.

She approached the door to the bridge which opened as she stood before it. She walked onto the bridge and surveyed the array of stations. She thought it odd that the engineering station was again unmanned. It was conceivable that the engineer was performing duties elsewhere, but his continued absence from the bridge was becoming too consistent to ignore. She would have to remember to ask LeMieux for an explanation.

On each side at the rear of the bridge were weapons stations, also unmanned. Leaning on the bulkhead behind one of the weapons stations was a pair of Scamfurr, lithe and muscular feline humanoids, a species which boasted phenomenal eyesight and quick reflexes. LeMieux had admitted that he considered them the best gunners in the galaxy. Amfess, the female, was reacting coyly to Parr, the male, as he tried to playfully nibble on her ears. Give them another few minutes of this, thought the Romulan woman, and there will be no getting them back to work.

Glaring at the Scamfurr, the Romulan woman

cleared her throat.

LeMieux turned and noticed her, and then turned toward the Scamfurr. Emitting a snort of amusement he called to them, "Parr! Amfess! Back to work, you two, before you jeopardize the commission you expect to get paid for this run."

The two Scamfurr glanced angrily at him, and at the Romulan woman, then reluctantly returned to their posts at the weapons stations.

Occupying stations at a console immediately before LeMieux's command chair were the helmsman and navigator. The Romulan woman could not place the species of either of these crewmen, but at the moment that did not greatly concern her. What did concern her was the fact that they were eating during the most critical phase of her mission; that of penetrating the starbase's defense scanners and patrol ships so that she could deliver the last of her 'packages' to anti-Federation interests on the planet they were approaching.

The helmsman, Greut, a large, burly humanoid, had a canister on the console near him from which came a constant squeaking and scratching. He reached into the canister and stirred around for a bit until he seemed to find what he had been searching for. By its

tail, he pulled out of the canister an ermite, a small rodent-like creature which was regarded as a great delicacy by his race when it was eaten gourmet-style, uncooked and alive. There were several other ermites clinging to the fur of the creature Greut was holding. They were feverishly shaking themselves back and forth, obviously trying to dislodge their comrade from Greut's thumb-and-forefinger grip. He gleefully shook them loose and back into the canister, and then popped the one he was holding into his mouth. As he chewed he turned toward the navigator with a greatly exaggerated satisfied smile on his face and said, "Mmmmm!" He picked up his canister and pushed it into the navigator's face while he swallowed and suggested, "Try one!"

Hagam-aur, a tall, slender humanoid, pushed the canister away and downed a great gulp of the steaming blue porridge from a large mug he was keeping at his station. "Proper food!" he asserted, pushing his mug into Greut's face.

"Bah!" rasped Greut, wrinkling his flat, generous nose. He then turned away before reaching into his canister again.

"Captain LeMieux!" stormed the outraged Romulan woman, "you are being paid to bring me and my cargo

through the Federation defenses on this planet! Instead of demanding vigilance from your crew, you permit them to paw upon each other and partake in what is undeniably a festivity on the bridge! I demand that you immediately stop these acts of foolishness and order your crew to apply their fullest attention to this dangerous phase of our mission!"

"My dear," smiled LeMieux through a veneer of oily charm, "it was you who insisted on installing your cloaking device in my ship's dining hall. Surely you can understand that my crew needs to eat somewhere. And as for applying themselves more to their jobs, why, you yourself assured me that when your cloaking device is working the crew is virtually unnecessary."

LeMieux was interrupted when Greut sprang from his seat clutching at his throat. He started to run, but lost his footing on one of several exposed heavy cables on the deck and landed heavily before the forward console.

Hagam-aur ran to his friend shouting, "He's choking on one of the ermites - it must have tried to run down his throat!"

The navigator rolled the heavy Greut onto his stomach and began pressing on his back, hoping to

dislodge the offending creature.

Captain LeMieux rolled his eyes in disgust as he forced his bulk out of the command chair. His helmsman had once again fallen victim to the bane of ermite gourmets. He dragged Hagam-aur away from Greut and then hauled the choking helmsman to his feet. "Hold him!" LeMieux shouted to Hagam-aur.

With great effort Hagam-aur held Greut erect with his arms behind his back. LeMieux walked in front of Greut, closed his fat fingers into a great fist, and drove it forcefully into Greut's midsection. Greut's eyes strained, barely holding their places in their sockets, but he made no sound. LeMieux cursed under his breath and repeated the procedure, this time with greater force. Greut violently coughed and expelled the unmoving body of the ermite onto the deck two meters in front of him. He then fell to his knees and drew in an enormous breath.

LeMieux rubbed his aching fist and smiled at the Romulan woman. "Remember that," he said. "It is indispensable first aid for my glutton of a helmsman."

Greut was still recovering with deep, rasping breaths. He stared at the ermite lying on the deck. It, too, was beginning to recover, its back legs starting to

twitch. Greut exploded onto his feet raising his great boot, hoping to smash the ermite beneath it. The premature effort caused him to collapse weakly onto the deck narrowly missing the ermite. It struggled, mere inches away from Greut's face, trying to right itself. Finally it succeeded and, as fast as it could, disappeared into an opening under the forward console. The entire bridge crew had gathered around the fallen helmsman and had seen what had happened. As Greut made a last impotent grab at the fleeing ermite they roared with laughter.

LeMieux was still smiling at the Romulan woman. "We keep telling him to eat them broiled, as nearly everyone else does," he chuckled to her.

The Romulan woman decided she could endure no more of the crew's irresponsible madness. She threw up her hands in frustration and screamed at nothing in particular. She withdrew behind LeMieux's command chair and then ran to the door. She repeatedly struck the slowly opening automatic door until it gave her enough of an opening to leave the bridge. After sprinting down the central corridor she angrily reentered her quarters and briskly walked in a tight circle, all the while talking to herself. Working with this crew was impossible, she seethed. They would not take orders from her - only from LeMieux.

While that had annoyed her she had tried to work within the confinements of that arrangement. But now it appeared that her last access to control of her mission was rapidly fading away. Captain LeMieux no longer took her seriously. Scum! He had repeatedly asked her to trust him. And remembering that, she laughed. She was forced to admit that the laughter was a good sign. In a moment she would regain her self-control. She was safe in her room, the only haven of sanity on LeMieux's ship. Safe, and clean, thanks to her efforts. She had fastidiously cleaned and sanitized her quarters, as if the scent of cleanliness was a charm powerful enough to keep at bay the evil spirits that had turned the ship's crewmen into such a mindless band of incompetents.

On the bridge, Captain LeMieux had returned to his command chair. This run really isn't going so badly, he thought confidently to himself. Greut has only choked himself once, so far, and there haven't been any signs of trouble from the starbase they were sneaking toward. Yes, he beamed, except for the indiscretion of that drunken engineer, Velis, this has been an almost flawless run.

* * *

The command center for planetary security scanning on Starbase Ketrige Alpha, the listening post, was currently manned by Lieutenant Tommy Van Halen, and a Vulcan, Lieutenant Taybok. The two lieutenants had become fast friends as cadets at the Starfleet Academy. On the surface the impulsive Van Halen and the stiff and proper Taybok seemed an unlikely combination, but theirs was a friendship based on a long period of mutual assistance to each other. At the Academy it had been Van Halen who had taught Taybok how to understand and fit in with passionate and illogical non-Vulcans, while on the other hand Taybok had imparted a small measure of self-discipline to Van Halen, and had taught him how to study and absorb new knowledge at the pace dictated by his classes. At the conclusion of their studies the two cadets had begun requesting duty assignments together. Their last orders had sent them to Ketrige Alpha, a new and expanding facility on the Romulan frontier.

"Another half hour to go," observed Van Halen, stealing a glance at the clock. "Do you have anything lined up for your off-duty time?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," replied Taybok. "I have learned that advance literature has been

supplied to our library on the new equipment which will be installed. I would like to review it."

"You always were the life of the party," smiled Van Halen as he leaned forward in his chair to make a small adjustment. "I'll warn you now, old buddy, don't call me if your wild evening gets out of hand, because I shall have more important things on my mind."

"Dinner again with Lt. Commander Joy?" asked Taybok with just a hint of disapproval in his voice.

"Guilty as charged," bragged Van Halen, "and later, a stroll through the gardens, perhaps."

"She is a superior officer..." Taybok reminded him.

"Only when the duty roster says she's working," explained Van Halen, raising his right index finger to support his feigned pretext of authority on the matter. "I guarantee you that after hours she's ... hello, that's weird!"

"What has happened?" inquired Taybok.

"This freighter I was tracking... Suddenly it just winked out," explained Van Halen.

"Can you be more specific?" asked Taybok.

"It vanished from the screen. One second it was there, and the next, it wasn't," answered Van Halen. "It winked out. Alright?"

"Any signs of trouble, or equipment malfunction?" Taybok calmly asked.

Van Halen checked his panel and initiated several quick diagnostic procedures. "No, nothing unusual."

"Then a cloaking device, perhaps?" Taybok speculated.

"On a freighter?" Van Halen doubtfully questioned.

"You have a point," Taybok conceded. "That is highly unlikely. I shall make the required reports to our superiors."

"Yeah, fine. You do that," said Van Halen. "Hey, for a moment I was picking up something on audio. Very weak, mostly static - though I could almost swear it was a voice."

The faint crackling burst of static had been automatically recorded. Van Halen recalled the digital file and fed it to the station computer for enhancement. A moment later the station computer indicated that its work was finished and Van Halen

instructed it to replay the enhanced transmission. The scratchy voice of a woman still distorted by static issued from the computer's speaker system. "I'm on my way."

"Would another pass through the enhancer help with sound quality?" asked Taybok.

Van Halen thought a moment before answering, "I'm really not sure. Maybe the lab specialists could filter some more of the static out. You know, it kind of sounds like static from a poor connection - these super-sensitive scanners could pick up something like that."

"Try to locate the transmission's source," suggested Taybok, "while I instruct the computer to attempt voice identification."

Both men worked independently for several minutes before Van Halen revealed, "The computer thinks the transmission came from where that disappearing freighter would be if it was still on my screen."

"Then perhaps the freighter is still out there," suggested Taybok before his attention was drawn to his own information monitor. "Look at this. The computer has established a voice match."

Van Halen wheeled his chair over to look at Taybok's screen. Astonished, he whistled. "Ksariss?" he said. "The Romulan spy? The architect of the Izar rebellions?"

"According to the computer," Taybok affirmed.

"Well, I know who to report this to!" declared Van Halen.

He punched a series of numbers into his computer's keypad. Moments later the face of the duty security officer, Lt. Commander Barbara Joy appeared on his video screen. "Hello, Tommy," she smiled, "I'm glad you called. I'm going to be a little late tonight ... "

"Probably later than you realize," said Van Halen sadly, thinking of the wonderful evening he was ruining by doing his duty. "Look, we may have something big for you. Guaranteed medals and promotions for all of us."

"What is it?"

"First there was a freighter that disappeared from our tracking screens. No sign of trouble or foul play. Next the computers picked up a burst of static in which the audio enhancers were able to find a woman's voice. Computers placed the source of this

static at where the freighter would have been if it hadn't disappeared from the tracking screens. And then Taybok ran a voice I.D. on the enhanced signal. The computers say the voice belongs to Ksariss. Is that big enough for you?"

Lt. Commander Joy paused before seriously replying, "Oh, yeah. Definitely big enough."

"Is that all you have to say?" asked Van Halen.

"Headphones, Tommy!" instructed Lt. Commander Joy. When she saw that Van Halen had placed his headphones over his ears, she continued. "I'm only telling you this because I trust you. Not a word - do you understand?"

Van Halen nodded his head, and then Lt. Commander Joy continued. "There was a security bulletin issued concerning an assault suspect who was taken into custody elsewhere. He admitted to being a member of a ship's crew that would be attempting to smuggle a Romulan spy through our planetary security nets. Her name is supposedly Ksariss, and our base was supposed to have been her next port of call. You may just have given us a shot at apprehending her."

Van Halen had noted that the prospect of capturing a Romulan spy had not seemed to make Lt. Commander Joy very happy. "So what's the problem?" he asked.

"It'll take time to assemble a complete squad for an attempted intercept," she said as she choked down her disappointment. "Two of my members left for reassignment this morning. Their replacements were delayed in transit and won't arrive for a few more hours."

"No problem. Taybok and I can help you if you need it," offered Van Halen. "Remember, we're both certified for security duty."

Taybok's eyes darted toward Van Halen with more than mild curiosity. He had not heard Lt. Commander Joy's explanation, but he had heard the part where Van Halen had volunteered him for something; and based upon the kinds of things for which Van Halen had sometimes previously volunteered him, he instinctively felt he should be putting some distance between himself and whatever scheme Van Halen had just hatched.

"I don't know, Tommy," Joy responded. "The base commander probably wouldn't ok your involvement in something like this ..."

Van Halen saw two officers walking together toward his duty station. Realizing that they were the ones scheduled to relieve Taybok and him, he tore off the headphones and leaped out of his chair.

"We can't wait around, fellas!" he said quickly. "Everything you'll need for your initial briefing is in the log." He turned to Taybok and urged, "Come on, hurry!"

Taybok started to voice a protest, but was interrupted by Van Halen. "Please, Taybok. Barbara's counting on us! She needs two extra crewmen. It's important!"

Reluctantly Taybok followed after Van Halen's frenzied exit.

* * *

Lt. Commander Joy's squad, into which she had reluctantly included Lieutenants Van Halen and Taybok, had beamed from the starbase complex on the planet's surface to an orbiting spacedock where

they had boarded a security patrol vessel and had departed to investigate the disappearing freighter. As they were checking their equipment Van Halen noticed that Joy and another man, Jackson, were wearing bulky wide black belts which had not been issued to the other security team members.

"Is there something special about those belts?" he asked.

"They're experimental," explained Joy. "HQ wants field-use feedback on them. The belts hold a miniaturized battery powered force shield generator. It can project a force shield around its wearer for a few seconds - just enough time to spring a surprise on somebody without getting hurt right away. Or so the manual says. It won't be as effective as a full backpack unit, but it's a lot lighter. Maybe we'll get a chance to try them out."

As the patrol vessel approached the anticipated coordinates of Van Halen's phantom freighter its scanners were unable to detect any ships, but they did register a suspiciously charged ion trail that seemed to be elongating itself toward KetrIDGE Alpha. Lt. Commander Joy ordered the patrol vessel onto a course parallel to the ion trail so that it could be scanned. She called Van Halen and Taybok to look at

the readings the sensors were gathering.

"Your opinions, Lieutenants," she said. "Is it possible that a ship ahead of us could be leaving this ion trail?"

"It has to be," said Van Halen. "This mix of radiation is what you'd expect from ion propulsion."

"I agree," volunteered Taybok. "Judging from the makeup of the trail's radiation, it must have been some time since this hypothetical engine has had any maintenance performed on it."

"Thank you," said Lt. Commander Joy. "It's time to test our theories. Open all channels for hailing, and watch out for surprises."

"All channels open, Sir," responded the Communications Officer.

"Attention, unidentified vessel. This is Lt. Commander Joy, Security Officer from Federation Starbase Ketrige Alpha. You are violating navigational regulations by traveling in a non-visible mode and by withholding your identification beacon. Please bring your vessel to a complete stop, shut down your engines, and prepare to be boarded."

Several minutes passed. "No response, Sir," said

Van Halen. "They're ignoring us."

"Attention, unidentified vessel. This is Lt. Commander Joy speaking," she said firmly and distinctly. "If you do not voluntarily comply with my instructions I will be obligated to use force to stop your vessel and board it. I will repeat my instructions. Bring your vessel to a complete stop, shut down your engines, and prepare to be boarded."

"Same negative response," said Van Halen a minute later.

"Then we'll have to try a little harder to get their attention," said Joy solemnly. "Forward phasers, on my command you will fire to disable. Is that understood?"

"Understood, Sir. Fire to disable. Sir, what are the target coordinates?"

"Target and follow the ion trail," said Joy. "If there really is an invisible ship, you'll find it just beyond the end."

"Aye, Sir."

Joy stared intently at the viewscreen and gave the order, "Forward phasers, fire!"

The phaser's beam traveled quickly along the ion trail until it encountered the invisible vessel which had created the radioactive ion beacon to its location. The outline of the ship became illuminated in a green ghostly hue. The mystery ship began a slight yaw to the left, straightened itself and continued on course at a slightly increased speed, and then faded from view as the distance between them increased.

"Forward phasers, again on my command, fire to disable," ordered Lt. Commander Joy, "only this time increase the duration of the beam fifteen percent."

"Aye, Sir. Fire to disable - fifteen percent duration increase."

"Forward phasers, fire!"

The patrol vessel's phaser beam again followed the ion trail, finding the mystery vessel and causing it to shudder as it struck the hull. The green hue appeared for an instant, brighter this time, and then faded. The mystery vessel remained visible and stable, drifting along with all major systems either incapacitated or shut down.

"Exactly what I wanted. Well done," said Joy. "Get a

tractor beam on that ship and keep a tight hold on her. Transporter Chief, do you have a place to beam us in?"

"Affirmative, Sir. A central corridor amid ship," replied the Transporter Chief. "I read most life forms on the bridge, toward the bow, heavily stunned at the moment. Wait, there's one additional life form, Romulan, in a compartment on the port side of the corridor, at the rear of the vessel before the engineering section."

"Boarding teams, listen up!" ordered Lt. Commander Joy. "Team 'A' will beam over first and move to secure the bridge. Team 'B'," she said looking at Van Halen, Taybok, and Jackson, "follow them as quickly as possible. Keep that corridor clear of surprises and try to keep the Romulan isolated in its room. You two rookies," she said to Van Halen and Taybok, "try to stay out of trouble, and don't take any unnecessary action against the Romulan until I join you. Any questions?"

There were none. Team 'A' filed quietly onto the ship's transporter pads and beamed to the mystery ship. Then Van Halen, Taybok, Jackson, and Joy beamed over. They reformed in a narrow corridor. After a quick look around, Joy motioned the others toward the rear of the ship and the door they were supposed to watch. As they moved toward their

station and took positions on both sides of the door, Joy sprinted toward the bridge. She disappeared into the bridge compartment. Shortly thereafter there was a single incident of hand phaser fire. Then voices belonging to members of the boarding team began loudly giving instructions, and things on the bridge appeared to be under control.

Several minutes later Lt. Commander Joy joined the 'B' team at the rear of the corridor. "All's quiet, I presume," she said.

Jackson nodded.

"It's quiet," said Van Halen, "because the bugs are afraid to stir up the dust. I wouldn't be surprised if Starbase Health and Sanitation condemns this tub before we get to use it for evidence."

"That's enough, Tommy," warned Joy sternly. She next turned her attention to the door. "Ma'am, we are Federation security agents. We know you're in there. My people have control of the ship. There is no possibility of escape. You could make this easy if you just open the door and come out peacefully."

After a short, agonizingly quiet pause, a woman's voice responded in a cold, even tone from behind the

door, "Are you prepared to pay the price for the pleasure of my company?"

Amused, Joy glanced at the men behind her. "Sounds like a pretty tough lady," she observed. Then more seriously she said, "Pay attention, here's the plan. I will disable the door's latching mechanism with my phaser. Then Jackson and I will force the door out of the way. We will activate our force shield generators and dive into the room to distract her attention. Because the shield frequencies won't be synchronized with our phasers, we won't be able to fire until the shields die out, which will happen quickly enough. You two must be ready to cover us and sweep the room with your weapons as we go in. Please, if she wants to play rough, get her before she gets us."

Their heads nodded in unison. Lt. Commander Joy pointed her hand phaser at the edge of the metal door, and its bright beam cut into the unit. After several seconds of cutting, the door jerked backward slightly. Lt. Commander Joy was satisfied. She looked into Jackson's eyes and mouthed the words, "On three."

Then, in strict rhythm she extended her fingers: one, two ... and on the count of three Jackson pulled the unsecured door back into the wall and, along with Joy, switched on his shield generator. Joy dived first

into the room, to the left, and Jackson followed to the right. As they landed on the floor and were reaching for their hand phasers they were enveloped in a shimmering protective glow which was already showing signs of fading. In confusion the Romulan woman, who had been holding ready a hand disruptor in anticipation of a forced entry, fired into the floor between them. In unison Van Halen and Taybok spun into the doorway with their phasers leveled at the Romulan woman. She saw them and started to raise her weapon. The two men in the doorway both fired. Stunned, she staggered, dropped her disruptor, and sank to the floor in an uncomfortable-looking heap.

As Taybok kept a watchful eye on everything in the Romulan woman's room, Van Halen stepped back into the corridor and looked toward the bridge. A member of the security team waved to him, and he waved back. Then, lightly bouncing back into the compartment, he was relieved to see Joy and Jackson sitting up on the floor. They were looking at the Romulan woman, now their prisoner, who was still out cold on the floor.

"How 'bout that! We pulled it off!" Van Halen cheered.

"Yeah, we pulled it off," agreed Lt. Commander Joy. "But I still think we're going to get a swift Starfleet boot in the derriere for bringing you two amateurs

along."

"A mere slap on the wrist, if anything," speculated Van Halen jubilantly. "And after they're through with that formality, they'll bring out the big guns of gratitude. They'll be saying thank-you for this long after we retire!"

Jackson laughed. "Was I this bad on my first time out, Commander?" he asked.

"Almost, Jackson. Almost," replied Joy with the wink of an eye.

----- CHAPTER ONE -----

It seemed an ideal world. Beautiful. Peaceful. Orderly. Safe.

And such a lovely creature he had found there. She was much like her world; beautiful, orderly, and safe. Captain James Kirk could not remember where they had met. Or how. It mattered little. Their meeting, their relationship - a feeling of inescapable destiny fulfilled.

She had an allure toward which Kirk felt he had been drawn, or should have been drawn. He tried to make himself believe he wanted her. There was no good reason not to seek out her company. Or was there? She had so much to offer, and yet to claim her entailed great sacrifice.

Kirk had taken her on long walks, to different places, discovering new things. She had smiled. Not for you anymore, she had reminded him. There are things to do at home. And he had returned home with her.

Kirk had lain with her in a field watching lazy clouds changing shapes high in the sky. Always a new shape to please the eye, to wonder about, to which he could wish to fly. She had smiled. So impractical for you now, she had reminded him. Things to do at home. And he had returned home with her.

Outside at night he had stood with her on his arm, counting the infinity of stars in a clear, cool sky. She had smiled and caressed him. Made him lose count. Gently pulled him toward home. Still things to be done. And he had returned home with her.

They were at home. It was that time again. Punctually she had gone to make them something to eat. What was it he had asked for again? It probably

didn't matter. Practically the same lunch every day. At home, good food, excellently prepared, lovingly served, but nearly always the same. At home, always the same.

He was next drawn from his work by the appearance of a ship. His ship. Enterprise. A tiny speck, far away, but growing rapidly.

It raced toward him, growing, filling his field of vision, demanding his attention.

It called to him. "Captain Kirk, please report to the bridge."

Kirk knew that voice. It belonged to another woman. Another beautiful woman.

A hatch opened on top of the saucer. Creatures were crawling out. Standing about on top of the saucer. Creatures that he knew.

Spock. McCoy. Scotty. Sulu. Chekov. Uhura. Over four hundred others. Calling. Come with us. To the bridge.

"Captain Kirk, please report to the bridge."

Kirk couldn't move. Not sure of what to do. Where did his duty lie? Home? Starship?

The creatures on the saucer reentered the hatch. The ship turned around. Started to grow smaller. Leaving. Leaving without him. Leaving without its Captain!

He jumped up, running after. Screaming... "No!"

Then, he found himself struggling to escape the blanket on his bunk.

"Captain Kirk, please respond."

Captain James Kirk kicked the blanket aside. He forced his legs over the edge of the bunk and sat up, drawing his hands down across his face. He reached out, pressing a button on the intercom. "I'm on my way, Lieutenant."

In the privacy of the turbolift Kirk rubbed his eyes. He was still the Captain of the U.S.S. Enterprise, leading a crew that had during the last five years become the pride of the fleet. A crew that had proved time and time again that it was capable of providing him with anything he required. Anything, it seemed, except a few hours of uninterrupted sleep.

The fact that he had gotten little sleep didn't surprise him. After all, he hadn't been sleeping well the last few weeks anyway. He supposed that he had

become caught up in the malaise that had been sweeping throughout the ship since the rumors had started drifting aboard. They were nearing the end of the five year mission. The most persistent buzz in the fleet grapevine had the Enterprise scheduled for a long layover in spacedock for a major overhaul and upgrades. The end of a long mission and the taking out of service of the Enterprise could mean reassignments for the crew. For the crew and for him it was the end of an era. What of the future, they were probably wondering, as was he. If he was given another ship, Kirk doubted he could ever assemble a crew that could match the one he presently led. When the orders finally came through, Kirk doubted that he would ever see most of his people again. He might be able to pull a few strings and keep some of his key personnel. But things would never be the same.

Kirk checked himself. He had been thinking about the captaincy of another ship. Most likely that would not be Starfleet's first offer to him. The talk was that he was being considered for promotion - to the admiralty. That had seemed to be where his career had been taking him. And then, for the first time, that idea started to bother him - the idea that his career had been taking him. Suddenly things became a little clearer. James Kirk, or the career. Which was in charge?

The turbolift door opened onto the bridge. With almost superhuman effort Kirk resisted the urge to yawn as he stepped out, narrowly missing an impact with Dr. McCoy who had been waiting to enter the turbolift.

"Sorry, Bones," Kirk apologized as he pushed past McCoy.

McCoy studied Kirk for a moment before venturing, "You're still looking a bit rough around the edges, Captain. You should try getting more rest."

Kirk turned and studied McCoy, trying to gauge the doctor's mood. When McCoy gave official medical advice he was always serious, but sometimes he could hide that quality under a smile, making the official advice seem more like a suggestion. Kirk decided that this was such a time.

Kirk returned McCoy's smile and said, "You've given me that advice before, Doctor, and I have tried to follow it. Perhaps you should have a talk with our superiors at Starfleet about waking me up in the middle of the night."

McCoy took a cup of coffee from the yeoman who was bringing it to Kirk and followed him to his command chair. Gratefully Kirk accepted the cup

from McCoy and took a long sip of the steaming black liquid.

Quietly McCoy said to Kirk, "We both know why you can't sleep, Jim. It's all these rumors about promoting you to Admiral. You're tearing yourself apart because you're trying to talk yourself into something you really don't want. Starfleet hasn't even made it official yet and you're agonizing over it."

"That's all they are at this point, Bones," said Kirk. "Just rumors. But if I was officially notified that I was under consideration for the Admiralty, whether or not to accept would not be an easy decision for me."

"Listen to me, Jim," said McCoy earnestly. "As your friend I can guarantee you won't be happy behind a desk. As your doctor I see what this is doing to you. And I've seen that captive look in your eyes before. You've had more of those dreams, haven't you?"

"We'll have to continue this later, Doctor," said Kirk with as much authority as he dared use against one of the few people aboard ship who could, with proper cause, relieve him of command. Doctor McCoy was leading him into things that had no place on the bridge.

"At your earliest possible convenience, Captain,"

said McCoy sourly before heading again toward the turbolift.

In spite of his latest bristly chat with Dr. McCoy, Kirk was at last feeling more focused. He swiveled the command chair to face the communications console, currently manned by Lieutenant Uhura.

"What do you have for me, Lieutenant?" Kirk asked.

"We're about to receive a coded message from Starfleet Sector Headquarters for you, Sir," she replied. "Commodore Clark is sending."

Commodore Clark, Kirk mused. Federation public relations officer, assigned to the trial of the Romulan spy, Ksariss. Clark had been the Federation's spokesperson at the press conferences, and had handled all communication with the news media during the trial proceedings. Starship Captains in the sector had been informed that if Ksariss was found guilty, one of them would be chosen to transport her from KetrIDGE Alpha, where the trial was being held, to an as yet undisclosed site of incarceration. And they were all secretly hoping to avoid that duty. Starfleet had learned that trouble followed Ksariss like bad air followed a skunk.

Kirk's thoughts were interrupted by the

appearance of the Starfleet logo on the forward viewscreen. The logo dissolved into the stern image of Commodore Clark.

"Captain Kirk, of the Enterprise." Clark's greeting had been more of a statement than a question.

"Yes, Commodore, what can we do for you?" asked Kirk.

"In case you haven't heard, the trial's finished," said Clark. "Starfleet got the conviction of Ksariss that it wanted."

"That's good news," said Kirk, "at least for Starfleet."

"Captain Kirk, I'm going to do you a favor and cut through the bull," asserted Clark. "Starfleet knows that none of you hotshots really wants to ferry this lady to prison. However, it's a job that needs to be done, and it's a job that you've been selected for. Relevant files and an official transcript of your orders will follow my transmission. We wish you the best of luck and a safe trip, Captain."

A normal star-filled panorama replaced Commodore Clark on the viewscreen as Lt. Uhura interrupted Kirk's thoughts. "I have received

Commodore Clark's transmission, Sir."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Unscramble the transmission and route the files to the terminal in my quarters. I'll sort things out there," said Kirk as he slid out of the command chair and headed for the turbolift.

Uhura was efficient. The files were waiting for Kirk when he walked into his quarters. He called the text onto his screen and started to read.

Ksariss' story, as far as the Federation was concerned, began with the advent of the unrest on Izar Gamma and Izar Delta, two colonized worlds near the Romulan Neutral Zone. Without any apparent provocation, colonists had begun rioting and protesting against Federation control of their affairs. The initial Federation investigations were unable to uncover any substantiated reasons for the colonist's belligerent behavior. In spite of Federation invitations to discuss whatever points had suddenly aroused the colonists, they remained adamant in demanding total and immediate independence. Incidents of social unrest occurred more and more frequently and involved larger numbers of colonists. Finally, in the interest of avoiding unnecessary violence, the Federation Council granted the two rebellious worlds complete political autonomy.

The two newly independent worlds soon fell to disputing among themselves. A mutually declared state of war between them soon followed. Since neither planet had developed any advanced interplanetary war capabilities, their 'war' was fought mostly with words. In spite of an occasional small raid on each other's shipping, neither side inflicted nor suffered much damage. Federation vessels stayed away from the sporadic fighting, although they patrolled nearby to keep undesirable elements from taking unfair advantage of the Izar system's unsettled interplanetary situation.

Behind the scenes the Federation Council pressed for explanations for the puzzling developments. When certain radical political groups became linked to the development of the unrest on both planets, investigators took a closer look at their activities. It was soon discovered that the groups' leaders had been meeting often with a Romulan diplomat named Ksariss, who was a member of a wealthy and powerful family of the Romulan aristocracy. Her government officially classified her as a diplomat, but investigators arrived at the undeniable conclusion that Ksariss was an undercover operator, specializing in stirring up events that resolved themselves in favor of Romulan interests. Her most recent assignment had been to head a Romulan plot to weaken Federation influence

along the Neutral Zone.

The Romulans had used Ksariss and her networks of anti-Federation political radicals to introduce a newly derived strain of virus to the Izar system. Colonists exposed to the virus were stricken with a short, intense infection which was treated with standard medications. What made this strain of virus so useful to the Romulan plotters was that it produced traces of a peculiar compound in the blood which reacted with the administered anti-viral medications. Medical personnel were puzzled when recovering colonists suddenly experienced an unanticipated period of incoherence, during which they were extremely susceptible to suggestions. That this strange development was caused by the reaction of the compound with the anti-viral medications was in time established. Colonists who were treated in the better facilities near major population centers experienced no ill effects from the recovery process. However, colonists in the outlying districts who received medical treatment from privately maintained mobile facilities, which were not regulated or monitored as closely as facilities in the population centers, received treatment from crews which had been infiltrated by agents trained by Ksariss. At the proper time in the recovery process, they were able to plant anti-Federation sentiments into the minds of

their patients. In this way the seeds of discontent washed into the cities from the outlying districts, and the aroused multitudes expressing the sentiments of their poisoned thoughts eventually won the freedom they believed they wanted.

Ksariss had reluctantly been allowed to travel freely, immune to any action by Federation authorities because of her rare designation as a Romulan Ambassador-At-Large, a title which neither the Romulan intelligence services nor the Romulan Senate admitted bestowing upon her. Secretly it had been suspected that she was making illegal clandestine journeys, involved in activities which would deny her the protection of diplomatic immunity. This had been impossible to prove until a chance piece of information learned from an arrested smuggler had alerted authorities that she would be attempting to do to Starbase KetrIDGE Alpha what she had done to the IZAR system. Her cloaked ship had been fortuitously detected approaching KetrIDGE Alpha, and she had been taken into custody.

Her trial had been marred by numerous suspicious incidents. Several potential witnesses had disappeared leaving no trace. However, several other witnesses who had escaped an attempted kidnapping by one of Ksariss' agents did testify in court,

presenting enough damaging evidence to turn the affair against her. Ksariss was convicted and sentenced to prison. She was to be temporarily held at Ketrige Alpha until transportation to a more secure facility was arranged. Shortly after the trial Federation authorities were forced to admit to the press that a transport ship carrying the departing witnesses had disappeared after departing from Ketrige Alpha. Ksariss' response to the press was that similar incidents could occur if she was not immediately released and pardoned. The news media, driven by its fertile imagination, began to publicly speculate about how far the influence of the convicted Romulan spy could possibly reach. Concerned Federation officials were also nervously seeking answers to that haunting question.

Kirk stared at the computer screen. His orders were clear: the Enterprise had been selected to transport Ksariss to the maximum security Bantam-Brooks Penal Facility in the Ellinger's Star system. Ellinger's Star was about as far from Romulans as anyone could get in Federation space. Kirk roughly calculated that the trip could take several weeks, barring any serious complications. He didn't like the feeling that having a dangerous passenger like Ksariss entrusted to his care for that amount of time made the occurrence of serious complications almost certain.

----- CHAPTER TWO -----

Cham Voxul, the Captain of the rogue freighter Prinche Gayul, again nervously checked the displays of his external scanning instruments. He was relieved to see that there were apparently no other vessels to be found within their effective range.

An added module placed over his command station console accommodated a bank of video monitors which enabled him to observe virtually every area on his ship. He instructed the module's control computer to run the monitors through a ship-wide check. He placed a set of headphones over his ears to monitor the sounds in the areas being scanned. In these ways he could privately verify that each crew member not posted on the bridge was where he was supposed to be and actually performing his assigned tasks.

Satisfied that everything was secure for the moment, Captain Voxul settled back in his chair and rubbed his tired eyes. Since accepting delivery of his present cargo Captain Voxul had slept very little.

Securely stashed in his ship's safest hold was the largest shipment of pragtite gemstones he had ever

encountered. Until a few years ago the only known source of pragtite gemstones had been an obscure moon orbiting a major planet in the Abacore star system. The mining company in the Abacore system which controlled the mineral and distribution rights to the gemstones was a subsidiary of the Abacore system's profit-minded government. By controlling the rate at which the gemstones were released into the open market the government was able to keep its gemstone prices artificially inflated. The government had controlled this lucrative market until deposits of pragtite gemstones were discovered in a neighboring star system. At that time an illegal marketing syndicate had developed which smuggled the alien gemstones into the Abacore system and sold them on the black market handsomely undercutting the inflated government prices. The cargo presently in the Prinche Gayul's hold was consigned to that marketing syndicate. This situation gave Captain Voxul several serious things to worry about. Detection by Abacore patrol vessels would mean confiscation of the cargo and a long sentence of forced labor in the Abacore government's gemstone mines. He also worried that unscrupulous crew members might attempt to pad their commissions by stealing gemstones from the ship's secure hold. To have anything at all happen to this particular cargo would be cause for alarm, as the marketing syndicate was

rumored to deal harshly with ships' Captains who failed to deliver a complete shipment. The Captain hoped that through his personal vigilance he could insure a problem-free journey. If he could avoid the Abacore patrols and maintain the integrity of his cargo, at the end of the run he would be a very rich ship's Captain.

Captain Voxul's thoughts were interrupted by his helmsman. "Captain, something strange on the screen. I can't get a lock on it, and it seems impossible to gauge its distance from us. It's that wavy area," he said pointing. "I've tried several discreet turns, but it compensates and holds a position in front of us."

Captain Voxul studied the forward screen, and then asked, "Are the scanners malfunctioning?"

"There should be no errors. We just had the system serviced."

"I remember," agreed Voxul. "Paid the bloodsucker enough for his service, too! Are the scanners even picking that up?"

"No, Sir. No readings at all. What'll we do about it, Captain?"

"It just stays in front of us, you say?" inquired

Voxul.

"Aye, Sir."

"Then bring us to a full stop, but be ready to get underway quickly," ordered Captain Voxul. "Let's just see what it does."

"Aye, Captain. Full stop she is."

On the screen the wavy area diminished in size for a few seconds, and then grew back to its former expanse. Its discreet pattern of waves became more aggressive, and then as they began to vanish, the outline of an imposing ship began to take shape: a saucer-ish midsection with upwardly angled pylons at the sides which held, most likely, a warp drive engine on the outer end of each one. As it drew nearer it angled upward to expose its graphically embellished underside which sported a sobering ship-wide image of the underside of a Romulan Bird-of-Prey.

"Well I'll be..." sputtered Captain Voxul.

A reproachful figure in a military uniform topped by a shining tunic appeared on the Prinche Gayul's forward screen, scowling, eyebrows furrowed, and inspiring a hint of evil intent with his pointed ears. "I have need of your ship," he said. "You will quickly

shut down every system except life support, put away all your weapons, and allow my party to board."

"Captain," said the helmsman with great concern, "there's only one kind of ship I ever heard of that can do what that ship just did. What is a Romulan Bird-Of-Prey doing this far into Federation space?"

"Romulan or not, there's only one ship full of them," said Captain Voxul, grimly aware that his precious cargo was imperiled. "Pass out weapons to the crew and prepare to repel boarders! I'll try to stall for a little time, or maybe talk them out of whatever they're up to."

As bridge personnel scrambled to carry out his orders Captain Voxul reached out to his console and opened a responding communications channel. "I don't know what you're trying to pull off, friend," he said bravely to the figure on the screen, "but I'll warn you, I am in the employ of a syndicate that's got some say in what happens in these parts. And I can assure you, you'll not want to be interfering in their business."

The menacing figure disappeared from his screen. Moments later there were shouts from other parts of the ship announcing that boarders had beamed in. Captain Voxul heard sounds of weapons fire from his

crew, and strange sounds that could only have come from the boarders' weapons. Several of the agonized screams which eventually filtered to the bridge were from voices he recognized.

Captain Voxul suddenly spun around in response to an eerie sound behind him. He found three boarders who had beamed onto his bridge pointing weapons at him. Suddenly he realized that he had forgotten to arm himself. The eerie sound came again, and then the man who had demanded his surrender on the screen was standing on his bridge.

Thinking of the terrible revenge the syndicate would extract from the rash alien, Captain Voxul threatened, "You'll regret this, Romulan!"

The Romulan rushed forward and tightly grasped Captain Voxul by his throat. Voxul instinctively brought his hands up to the Romulan's wrist, and found that he could not weaken the powerful tenacious grip.

"Order your crew to surrender!" hissed the Romulan fiercely.

Voxul considered whether dying at the hand of an angry Romulan was worse than facing the syndicate's enforcers. He decided that being killed by the

Romulan was the quickest solution to his dilemma. He remained silent.

A Romulan Centurion trotted onto the bridge and saluted. "Commander, the ship is secured. We have ten prisoners who surrendered."

"Very good, Centurion," smiled the Romulan Commander through clenched teeth. He relaxed his grip on the Captain Voxul's neck and said, "The wiser members of your crew have decided that you shall live."

Several minutes after the Romulan Commander had completely loosed his grip on his neck Captain Voxul asked, "What do you want with my ship?"

"I simply require your ship, and you," said the Commander secretively. "The reason shall remain mine to reveal for the time being. As for your crew, there is a barely habitable planetoid near here. They will be placed there with several weeks' provisions, along with a transmitter which will reveal their location after one of your weeks has passed. That is all you need to know for the present."

The Commander turned to the Centurion and directed, "Take all the prisoners to our ship and confine them. Treat them well if they behave." He

then looked at Captain Voxul, sneered wickedly, and then added, "Keep this one apart from the others."

* * *

After the trial on KetrIDGE Alpha, Ksariss had enjoyed almost unhindered access to the news media. She had continued making her threats, and had boasted that she would never see the inside of Bantam-Brooks. KetrIDGE Alpha's Commanding Officer, Commodore Barry, had taken her threats seriously. He had been shocked to learn that classified information which identified the ship chosen to transport Ksariss to Bantam-Brooks was openly circulating both on and off the base. Barry blamed the media for this latest breach of security. The reporters who had been underfoot since the Ksariss business began had been relentlessly foraging for any new triviality to build into a major news event. Under his breath he cursed the reporters who would not let the story die a natural death, and then he promised himself that as soon as the troublesome spy was out of his hair, he would instruct his security and legal advisors to find ways to tighten his base's security.

* * *

Captain Kirk scrawled his signature on the report which had been presented for his approval and passed it back to the pretty Ensign who would efficiently file it with the rest of its genre. "How long until we reach KetrIDGE Alpha, Ensign Chekov?" he asked.

Ensign Pavel Chekov, navigator, studied his panel and turned to face Kirk. "I estimate in a little over an hour, Captain."

"Thank you, Ensign," replied Kirk. "Mr. Sulu, when we arrive at the starbase, assume a standard orbit."

"Aye, Sir. Standard orbit programmed in," said the helmsman, Lt. Hikaru Sulu.

"Captain," interrupted Lt. Uhura, "I'm picking up a civilian news broadcast from KetrIDGE Alpha. Perhaps you should hear it."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Put it on screen."

A greying, distinguished anchorman from a prominent news service, seated behind a large, dark

desk was reading from a low monitor in front of him at his desk. "... and sources close to the Starbase Commander, Commodore Barry, have informed us that the convicted Romulan spy, Ksariss, will be taken to the Bantam-Brooks facility aboard the U.S.S Enterprise. Commodore Barry has refused to comment on why the Enterprise was chosen, but, if I may be permitted a moment of editorial comment ..."

"Why not just tell the whole quadrant the rest of the plans for our secret mission?" sarcastically blurted Chekov while waving a hand through the air.

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov," interrupted Kirk, "but I'm sure the media will need no suggestions from my bridge on how to make our job more difficult."

"Sorry, Sir," apologized Chekov.

"It would seem that we have lost some of our element of surprise," observed First Officer Spock.

"So it would seem," agreed Kirk. "Mr. Spock, a word with you in private, please," Kirk said as he arose and headed for the turbolift. "Mr. Sulu, you have the bridge."

Commodore Barry rushed into the main Starbase transporter room anxiously checking the wall-mounted chronometer. To his relief he was just in time to receive the Enterprise's Captain Kirk as he beamed down. Barry knew people who knew Kirk. Most of them were of the opinion that James Kirk was someone he would enjoy meeting.

Right on schedule the transporter began to hum, and the colored lights danced on the transporter pad. Barry took a deep breath and stepped forward to shake the hand -- of someone who was definitely not James Kirk.

"Good day, Sir," said the unanticipated man in a thick Scottish brogue as he stepped off the transporter pad and shook Barry's hand.

"Er, good day, er, Commander," stammered Barry. Regaining his composure, he said, "Please, excuse me. I thought you would be Captain Kirk."

"Aye," said the man who was still pumping his hand and smiling like a professional goodwill ambassador, "I can understand your expecting the Captain, and he does send his apologies. With your permission, Sir, I am Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, Chief Engineer

of the U.S.S Enterprise."

"Pleased to meet you, Mt. Scott," said Barry. "You oversee a fine ship, from what I'm told."

"Aye," beamed Scott, who had been inspired to an even grander smile, "that she is, Sir. That she is!"

"So tell me, why hasn't Captain Kirk beamed down himself?" Barry asked.

Scott's smile faded, his face becoming apologetic. "The Captain hopes that I can make the necessary arrangements for the transfer of your prisoner without drawing too much unnecessary attention," he explained. "You see, Sir, we've monitored the news broadcasts ..."

"I understand, Mr. Scott. Unfortunately, security hasn't been easy to maintain down here," Barry explained. "We've been literally tripping over reporters for months. Some of them are the best in their business."

"I know what you're saying," said Scott. "Sometimes they're a royal pain in the duff, but then again, sometimes they do prove their worth."

Barry would not contradict Scott on that point. Instead he gestured toward the door and said, "Come

this way, Mr. Scott. We're soon scheduled to start a meeting to arrange for our prisoner's transfer to your custody."

Fifteen minutes and several introductions later Barry and Scott had joined the rest of Barry's staff in their conference room. Barry took him around introducing him to each of his staff members, saving his security chief for last. "This is an introduction I'm proud to make," he said to Scott. "Meet Lt. Commander Barbara Joy, our head of security. She led the squad that took Ksariss into custody."

"That's quite a feather for your hat," said Scott pleasantly.

"Thank you, Mr. Scott," she said with a smile. "But honestly, we practically owe our success to plain old dumb luck."

"I've run into an old proverb that says: 'whenever your opponent blinks is the best time to stick your finger in his eye'," observed Scott.

"So true," laughed Lt. Commander Joy. "We do try to make the most of the breaks we get."

The group walked to a nearby secure conference room where Commodore Barry said, "I believe we've

all been introduced now. Everybody, please take your seats so we can get to our business."

When everyone was seated, Commodore Barry called the meeting to order. "First of all," he said, "an apology is in order to the crew of the Enterprise. Word has unfortunately leaked out that the Enterprise will be taking the spy, Ksariss, to Bantam-Brooks."

"Captain Kirk is aware of this development," Scott replied, "but he still believes that with proper planning and precautions we can retain control over any situation which could develop."

"Now that's a welcome positive assessment," said Barry. "How soon will Captain Kirk be ready to beam the prisoner up to the Enterprise?"

"That's one of the things I'm supposed to talk to you about," said Scott. "Captain Kirk believes that there are disadvantages to transferring the prisoner by transporter."

"What does he mean by 'disadvantages'?" asked Barry.

"Captain Kirk is concerned about the possibility of a cloaked Romulan ship somehow interfering with the transporter beam," explained Scott. "If we'd lose the

beam and she'd end up on one of their ships - well, all I need say about that is that cloaked Romulan ships are not always the easiest things to find, much less track."

"Does Captain Kirk have an alternate proposal?" asked Barry.

"You have a squad of armed shuttle craft on base," said Scott. "Captain Kirk suggests that Ksariss be placed into one of these armed shuttles and flown up to the Enterprise. The other armed shuttles could be used to provide a protective escort. Meaning no offense, Commodore, but in light of the base's current security problems, knowledge of which shuttle would carry the prisoner would be restricted to only those who had a need to know."

"Armed shuttles. Protective escort," muttered Barry as he thought about what Scott had proposed. "Maybe your Captain has a good idea here, Mr. Scott: doing things the opposition wouldn't expect. We're going to go with Captain Kirk's plan. Barbara, have your people make the arrangements, and remember, sensitive information only to those who need to know."

While Barry's staff gathered their papers and left the conference room Scott stayed seated.

"Is there something else you wanted, Mr. Scott?" Barry asked.

"Aye. I'd very much like a private word with you, Sir."

"What is this about, Lt. Commander?"

"It's about your security leaks," Scott revealed.

"We haven't had time to work up and implement the necessary changes, or find the sources of the leaks," said Barry. "Why did you bring them up again?"

"Because, Sir, Captain Kirk doesn't feel it will hurt if word of this secret shuttle transfer plan gets around," said Scott. "In fact, he's counting on it. With your permission, Sir, I'd like to discuss the real reason I'm here."

* * *

Aboard the Enterprise at the expected departure time of the armed shuttle flight, Lt. Uhura was

listening on a previously arranged frequency. Her eyes snapped open as a communications link was suddenly established. "Incoming transmission from Commodore Barry, Sir," she announced to Kirk.

"Put it on screen, Lieutenant," Kirk replied.

"The viewscreen showed Commodore Barry in his office, seated behind his desk. Appearing distressed, he was looking off to one side as if he was receiving news he did not want to hear.

"I'm sorry, Captain Kirk," he finally said, "we're experiencing delays. It looks like it will be at least another hour and forty-five minutes before the shuttles can lift off."

Kirk looked straight at the forward viewscreen. "It looks like you're running a sloppy ship today, Sir. However, when you're ready, we'll be here."

"My undying gratitude, Captain!" said Barry sarcastically before giving the signal to cut off his transmission.

Kirk could almost feel himself being pummeled by the unspoken questions which accompanied the confused looks on the faces of the bridge crew. He busied himself, quickly signing another item of

paperwork which had suddenly appeared.

The bridge crew, expecting the long delay promised by Commodore Barry, began to settle into more comfortable positions in the chairs at their stations. They were all surprised when Spock announced, "The Ketrige Alpha shuttle convoy has just lifted off, Captain."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied. "Please alert the security detachment in the shuttle bay that the anticipated cargo will arrive shortly. I'm going down there. You have the bridge."

After Spock's acknowledgement Kirk arose and walked toward the turbolift. Still mystified by the recent exchange between Kirk and Barry, Chekov turned around at his station and said, "I don't understand, Captain ..."

Kirk stopped and smiled. "A little ruse, Mr. Chekov. The word 'delays' means 'no problems'. The time period 'hour and forty-five minutes' actually means 'a minute and forty-five seconds'."

The precision shuttle convoy gracefully ascended from the planet's surface and achieved orbit. A short

time later it approached the Enterprise, moving into a protective formation around one of its members which gradually overtook the starship's slowly opening shuttle bay door. In an exquisitely timed ballet, the approaching shuttle entered the bay at exactly the same time the bay doors had fully opened. Kirk arrived in the shuttle bay control room in time to see the armed shuttle carefully settling onto the deck. When the bay doors had closed again atmosphere was reestablished in the area. Kirk went to wait beside the shuttle, and greeted Commodore Barry who stepped out the shuttle door when it opened.

"I trust you had a pleasant flight, Commodore," said Kirk offering his hand.

"Pleasant enough, Captain," Barry replied. "It looks as if the first phase of our little scheme is working as planned. I can't say enough how relieved I'll be when this whole affair is finished."

Minutes before, Dr. McCoy, as ordered, had arrived in the Enterprise's transporter room. At the transporter controls Lt. Commander Scott watched as McCoy arranged things he would need on a small portable table. As he worked, McCoy glowered at Scott and a team of security officers who were watching him and grumbled, "I hope this won't take all day. In a proper medical practice it's the doctor

who keeps the patients waiting."

Scott grinned before his attention was diverted by a summons from the bridge. "Has our ship's doctor arrived yet, Mr. Scott?" inquired the voice of Mr. Spock.

"Aye, he's here," Scott replied, "and in good spirits, as usual."

"Excellent," said Spock. "Please inform the doctor that a patient is about to be beamed aboard from the Starbase infirmary. His orders are to please make the patient as comfortable as is prudent. Spock out."

The shimmering lights of the transporter came alive as Scott handled the controls on his panel. The figure materializing appeared to be a sleeping mummy in a wheelchair.

When the reassembly phase had finished, McCoy pulled his table to the wheelchair and began carefully removing the facial bandages. The sleeping face of Ksariss, partially obscured by an oxygen mask, was revealed. He injected a hypo of stimulant into her neck. Her eyes opened, and McCoy loosened the straps of the oxygen mask while holding it in place. He turned to hunt for something on the table and suddenly felt an intense, sharp, grinding pain in his

right little finger. He dropped the mask and cried out, whirling around to find that Ksariss had bitten him! She had more than just bitten him - she was sawing with grim determination on her prize, trying to tear it from his hand! McCoy reached around the back of her head and grasped her jaw. Angrily he pulled down with little thought to the possibility he might actually hurt his patient. He quickly managed to free himself. Ksariss struggled against her restraints, rocking the wheelchair and nearly toppling it off the transporter platform. The two security officers rushed in to steady her. Seeing that she had reached a point of getting nowhere, she ended the incident by spitting on McCoy's shoes.

As McCoy assessed the damage to himself he noticed that Kirk and Commodore Barry had arrived in time to witness the embarrassing affair.

The security officers moved Ksariss away from the transporter platform. "Let's take our passenger to her quarters, gentlemen," Kirk ordered. "And please, be careful."

Kirk then turned his attention to the injured doctor. "Care to tell us where you acquired your caring bedside manner, Doctor?"

"In veterinary school, if it's any of your business,"

McCoy returned sharply while applying a dressing to his aching finger.

Kirk laughed. "I'm no Doctor, Bones, but it looks to me as though you'll survive," he offered in consolation. "And as your injury isn't incapacitating, I'll need you down in detention to oversee the settling in of our passenger. Kind of make sure there are no residual effects from her sedation. Think you can handle it?"

"I can handle it, Captain, if you can have somebody stationed at the cell door with a tranquilizer gun!"

"Excuse me, Captain," interrupted a smirking and relieved Commodore Barry, "I see that you have everything under control here. I really must be returning to KetrIDGE Alpha."

"Of course, Commodore," said Kirk. "I'll see you back to the shuttle bay while my officers see that our guest's special needs are being met."

---- CHAPTER THREE ----

Still restrained in her wheelchair, Ksariss was

escorted by the armed security detachment to the Enterprise's detention section. As her remaining restraints were removed she sat silently and emotionlessly, glaring into the maximum security cell into which she would be placed. Dr. McCoy scanned her with his medical tricorder verifying that the sedative administered to her before transporting off Ketrige Alpha had been completely neutralized. He then placed the instrument safely out of reach so that it could not be used as a weapon against himself or a member of the security detachment. To assist her out of the wheelchair McCoy cautiously offered her his right hand - the one with a bandaged finger. "These are to be your quarters, Madam," he said.

Without shifting her eyes from the rear wall of the cell she disdainfully brushed McCoy's arm aside and smartly stood on her feet. If she was aware that a nervous security officer had placed his hand on his phaser in response to her action she gave no outward indication of it. She remained in place for a moment, testing her reaction to the act of standing. She felt perfectly normal, and was forced to concede that perhaps the Federation barbarians had at least one individual, the Doctor, who knew what he was doing. Before McCoy had time to say anything more or attempt to touch her again to prompt her movement toward the cell door she mustered her remaining

dignity and entered the cell. She gracefully slid onto the bunk, leaning back against the wall with her arms folded. And there she remained, unmoving, and uncharacteristically quiet.

One of the security officers smugly engaged the force field over the cell door, and watching the Romulan woman inside, slowly stepped back to stand beside McCoy. "She looks like a caged leopard," he said softly to McCoy, "lazing in a corner, one eye half open, watching, maybe waiting. What do you suppose she's waiting for?"

"She's waiting for one of the zookeepers to make some stupid mistake," McCoy warned. He showed the security officer his right hand and said, "Watch out for her. She bites!"

On the bridge Kirk was mentally reviewing all the preparations which had been made, again trying to reassure himself that no important detail had been overlooked. He could think of nothing else which needed to be done. Security and all other departments had reported to the bridge that everything was ready for departure. Kirk turned around to look at Spock who was busy at his station.

"Any last thoughts, Mr. Spock?" he asked.

"None, Captain," Spock answered. "The ship awaits your orders."

"Then it seems that we are at least prepared for the expected," said Kirk. He pressed a button on the arm of the command chair, opening a channel to address the entire ship. "Attention, all hands. This is the Captain. I need not remind you of how seriously this mission needs to be taken. From this moment on, stay alert. Expect the unexpected. Remember that we are the crew of the U.S.S. Enterprise. I have every confidence in our continued commitment to excellence. We all know our jobs - let's do them well and make this ship proud to have carried us. Kirk out."

Kirk looked around the bridge. Everyone was ready and waiting, and it was time to be underway. "Mr. Sulu, lay in your course for the Bantam-Brooks facility and take us out of orbit. Ahead, warp factor two when we are clear."

The Enterprise leisurely moved out of its orbit around KetrIDGE Alpha, accelerating easily under impulse power until it had cleared the star system. Sulu then brought the ship to warp two and onto the heading of the first segment of its trip to Bantam-Brooks. It had been planned that on this voyage the Enterprise would adhere to a strict schedule, checking

in at specified times with key starbases along their planned route.

The first few days passed without incident and the crew started settling into their routines. As the Enterprise had traveled farther away from the Neutral Zone the crew's early feelings of nervous anticipation had given way to feelings of relief, and of being more in control of events. This change in attitude concerned Kirk. He contemplated scheduling a series of drills and inspections across all the duty shifts, hoping to hone the crew's attitudes and reflexes back to a razor-edged keenness. He then decided against this course of action realizing that focusing the crew's attention away from alert monitoring of everything around them could possibly do more harm than good.

Instead of formal inspections Kirk started an informal tour of the ship. As he moved among the duty stations he found things in an excellent state of readiness. He tried to project a casual, friendly aura as he talked with crewmembers, complimenting them on what he found, and pressing upon them the importance of the heightened vigilance that he felt the mission called for.

In time he found himself in McCoy's medical department. He stuck his head into McCoy's office, interrupting the Doctor as he asked, "Mind if I exercise

Captain's privilege and look around a little?"

"Not at all," McCoy replied without looking up.

Only a few minutes later Kirk returned to stand before McCoy's desk. McCoy pushed his computer monitor aside and asked, "Finished looking around already, Captain?"

Kirk stifled a yawn before answering, "It didn't take long to see that everything is up to your usual high standards, Doctor."

"I knew that's what you'd find," McCoy smiled. "When my nurses heard you were conducting a surprise inspection they scurried around like madmen trying to clean up a few out-of-place items."

"Inspection, Doctor?" queried Kirk with an impish grin. "I never announced an inspection."

"Well, whatever you're calling this little stroll through the ship, that's how it's being received," said McCoy. "Your arrivals have not been, and will not be unanticipated."

"Thanks for the warning," Kirk said as he attempted to hide another yawn, "but I have to be moving along."

"One minute, please, Captain," said McCoy as he

stood and walked toward Kirk. "I know what you're trying to do, and I applaud the idea, but don't you think your department heads could finish this job just as well?"

The first syllable of Kirk's reply hadn't even been uttered before McCoy pressed ahead toward the point he had been hoping to make. "In this country doctor's opinion, Captain, you've been neglecting your biological needs. Why, if I didn't know better I'd suspect that you were afraid to close your eyes out of fear that your Enterprise would disappear if you did. Are you remembering that you've been handed an assignment that could still blow up in your face? You're probably taking some high-ranking Romulan's girlfriend to prison, and nobody in Starfleet expects the Romulans to take that lying down. Now that sounds to me like a convincing argument for alert officers. Jim, it's time for you to get some rest."

"But, Bones, I've started this tour - I really should finish it."

"If you keep brushing aside my advice then surely one of my worst nightmares will come true," forecast McCoy as his eyes arched toward the ceiling and he spread his arms. "The ship I am serving on gets blown across the galaxy because its Captain has fallen asleep on the bridge. It's not a pretty picture, Jim."

"I guess I have been trying to do it all," admitted Kirk.

"You mean you're actually going to take my medical advice?" mocked McCoy.

Kirk smiled. "After a short meeting with my department heads, Doctor. Then I'll be off to my quarters."

"And some rest!" McCoy reminded.

* * *

Kirk stirred in his bunk. It seemed as though his eyes had only just closed before he had become aware of Spock's voice calling him on the intercom. "I am sorry to disturb you, Captain, but your presence is required on the bridge."

"Acknowledged, Spock. I'm on my way."

When Kirk stepped out of the turbolift he saw Spock leaning forward in the command chair, intently studying the forward viewscreen. He approached the command chair and asked, "Is there a problem, Mr.

Spock?"

"Possibly, Captain," Spock replied as he surrendered the command chair to Kirk. "There is a visual anomaly on the forward viewscreen which does not show up on our sensors. I have taken the liberty of checking for equipment malfunctions. None were found."

"What does this anomaly do?" Kirk asked.

"It appears as you now see it - a small distortion," Spock explained. "It remains discernable for a time and then disappears. There seems to be no pattern to its appearances and disappearances."

"If this anomaly is real, what would you say is its range?" Kirk asked.

"I could only provide a guess," said Spock hesitantly.

"Indulge me," Kirk coaxed.

Spock took in a slow breath and studied the viewscreen again. "Extreme sensor range is as far as I am willing to speculate," stated Spock as the distortion vanished from the screen.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk acknowledged as he

looked back at the viewscreen. "Would you care to speculate as to the nature of the anomaly?"

"It resembles certain phenomena I have encountered..." Spock ventured.

"What phenomenon would you say it most resembles?" Kirk asked.

"In my opinion, it most resembles a cloaked ship, Captain."

"Thank you for your candor, Mr. Spock," said Kirk. "Frankly, I quite agree. Perhaps it is time to test our theory. Mr. Sulu, bring the ship to starboard ten degrees. Hold that heading for thirty minutes, and then steer us to the coordinates of our first checkpoint. Adjust our speed to make sure we get there on time. Lt. Uhura, notify Starfleet of our change in course and our reason for doing so. Code the message Priority One."

For the next ten minutes the distortion stayed with the Enterprise, playing a cat-and-mouse game, appearing and disappearing. Then, unexpectedly, it failed to reappear. At the end of the half hour on the alternate heading Sulu adjusted their heading and speed and arrived at the first checkpoint exactly on schedule. Upon passing the checkpoint Kirk learned

that Starfleet was concerned enough about their 'shadow' to place tracking stations along their route on full alert. Clearance was given for the ship to proceed to its next checkpoint.

More time passed uneventfully as the Enterprise traveled deeper into Federation territory and farther away from the Neutral Zone and the Romulan Empire. Suddenly Uhura interrupted the steady buzz of activity on the bridge. "Captain, I am picking up a distress call from a freighter, the Prinche Gayul. The ship's Captain reports serious fuel reactant leaks in the engine compartment."

Kirk sat erect in his chair. "Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

The flickering image of a bruised, panic-stricken, heavily sweating man wearing a soiled and worn commercial ship's Captain's hat appeared on the viewscreen. The man obviously hadn't seen a razor in days. His eyes were wide open with terror as his gaze darted among several off-screen points. "Anybody out there - you've got to help me!" he pleaded. "Get me out of here before this ship blows itself apart!"

The transmission faded into a burst of static and noise.

"Get him back, Lieutenant!" Kirk ordered. "I need a fix on the source of his transmission."

"I already have the coordinates, Captain," Uhura reported.

"Captain," interrupted Spock from his station, "there is no record of a flight plan for any ship of that registry. I must also point out that all commercial traffic was supposed to have been routed away from our anticipated route to Bantam-Brooks."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," said Kirk thoughtfully. "This appears suspicious, but if there's any chance someone is in trouble on that ship..." Kirk considered his options for a moment. "We will not ignore a distress call. Bring the ship to yellow alert. Keep the shields up, but stay ready to lower them if we need to use the transporters. Lt. Uhura, advise Starfleet of our situation. Tell them that we are investigating a distress call and request anything they can provide to back us up. Mr. Sulu, take us to the Prinche Gayul. I want full scans, set all sensors on maximum."

The Enterprise approached the Prinche Gayul cautiously at one quarter impulse power. Sensor readings consistently showed nothing more than a freighter dead in space. Except for minimal life support on the bridge maintained from failing

batteries, all its systems were shut down. Radiation leaking from the engine compartment made it impossible to scan for other life forms on the vessel. There had been time to do no more than gather this preliminary information before a bright explosion erupted from the far side of the freighter and sent it tumbling toward the Enterprise.

"Red alert! Get us out of the way, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk ordered.

As the Enterprise glided above the path of the cartwheeling freighter, Chekov watched it rolling by on the viewscreen. "Look at the metal in the area of the explosion," he indicated. "Whatever caused that came from outside the vessel!"

"Captain Kirk, I have communications with the Prinche Gayul," Uhura reported.

On the viewscreen was the same unshaved ship's Captain who had apparently suffered additional injuries from the explosion. "Why didn't you hurry?" he gasped. "They said they would blow up my ship when they left. You could have stopped them. Help me now before they come back!"

Uhura's communication link faded again and the image of the freighter's battered interior was replaced

with a view of it tumbling against the stars and blackness of space. Kirk was compelled to attempt a rescue of the vessel's survivors.

"Transporter room, can you lock on to any survivors in that freighter?" he demanded.

"Just barely, Sir. We show one survivor on the bridge."

"We'll drop our shields long enough to beam the survivor on board," Kirk decided. "Mr. Sulu, drop shields - now!"

The Enterprise's shields dropped and her transporter locked onto the body of the Prinche Gayul's Captain. At that moment the one thing Kirk least expected to see materialized behind the tumbling wreck of the freighter.

A Romulan Bird Of Prey became visible, its form stabilizing as its cloaking field dissipated in diminishing waves of distortion. Kirk mentally chastised himself for having ordered the Enterprise's shields lowered. No longer cloaked, the Romulan ship's power was now available for its weapons systems, and the Enterprise lay fully exposed in its sights until the transporter finished pulling the survivor out of the freighter. Kirk recognized the

design of the Romulan vessel, a product of the latest treaties and technological exchanges between the Klingons and the Romulans. It was a vessel carrying powerful plasma disruptors and accurate torpedoes, easily an equal in firepower to the Enterprise. At this close range Kirk expected his ship to be raked by disruptor fire. Instead, an intruder alert sounded, and the Romulan ship started firing into the hull of the *Prinche Gayul*.

As Spock dispatched a security team to investigate the intruder alert Kirk reopened the channel to the transporter room. "Do you have that survivor on board yet?" he demanded.

"We're trying, Sir! They keep firing at the freighter. The resulting proximity interference makes it almost impossible to maintain our transporter lock."

"Whatever can be done, do it quickly. I need to get the shields up!" admonished Kirk. "Mr. Sulu, as soon as the transporter gets that survivor..."

"Understood, Captain," affirmed Sulu. His hand hovered over his panel, ready to reengage the shields. Meanwhile, Chekov had established a weapons lock on the Romulan ship. As soon as the Captain of the freighter was safely on board they would deal with the Romulan ship.

The commanding officer of the Romulan warship, Talon, was a tall, solidly-built man. His name was Commander Kohbrah. He was intelligent and well-schooled and had earned his command as a reward for an inspiring act of heroism early in his service career. He sat on the bridge of the Talon excitedly watching the initial phases of his plan unfold.

Through his connections in the Romulan High Command, Kohbrah had learned of the capture of the agent Ksariss. After seeing a picture of her he had volunteered to lead the effort to reclaim her from Federation custody. His sources had informed him that Ksariss was rich and powerful, and known to bestow gifts and favors upon those who served her in time of need. The only discernable inconvenience to involving himself in her life was her 'attachment' to a prominent member of the Romulan Senate. Snatching her back from Federation authorities would certainly net him wealth and promotions. But Kohbrah desired more: a marriage - at least one lasting long enough to entrench him as a recognized member of the Empire's elite ruling class. In Kohbrah's eyes there was a chance that by rescuing Ksariss he could cause her to become sufficiently smitten by his bravery and his

apparent commitment to her that she would dissolve her attachment to the senator and bond in matrimony to him. If the marriage proved harmonious, so much the better. And if not, Romulan law insured that he would be amply compensated for the time he had invested. His was an inspired plan, and at the moment Kohbrah was delighted because his plan had progressed flawlessly.

A Romulan agent on Ketrige Alpha had supplied the name of the ship and the route it would take in transporting Ksariss to prison. Originally Kohbrah had planned to secretly follow that ship until it had reached a remote point in its journey. He had then hoped to decloak, disable the ship, and demand Ksariss' release before dashing back to the Neutral Zone with a grateful passenger who would be the key to his future. His plans had changed, however, when he had stumbled onto the decrepit old freighter which, according to his best information, wasn't expected to be in that area in the first place. A minimal boarding party had easily taken over the vessel. Kohbrah had then removed the crew, except for the Captain, and had the freighter towed to coordinates near the anticipated path of the Enterprise. He had then ordered the freighter's engines sabotaged, and a remotely detonated explosive charge was affixed to its outer hull. Then leaving the Captain aboard to

broadcast a distress call, Kohbrah cloaked his warship and lay in wait for the Federation Starship carrying Ksariss.

As planned, the Enterprise had responded to the distress call. When the Enterprise had dropped its shields to attempt transporting the freighter's Captain off his ship, Kohbrah had ordered the explosive device on the freighter's hull detonated. The Talon had then decloaked and had begun firing into the freighter's hull to confound the Enterprise's rescue attempt while simultaneously beaming onto the Enterprise an elite team of warriors who would attempt to liberate Ksariss from confinement.

The Romulan rescue team was beamed to a corridor one deck below the detention area holding Ksariss. No sooner had they materialized and looked around than an alarm sounded. Knowing that someone would soon be sent to investigate, the team leader motioned toward a nearby turbolift. The four team members scrambled inside and the door closed after them. It had previously been decided not to try directing turbolift by voice command. Instead, one of the team members pried off an access panel, studied the circuitry inside, and attempted a connection to force the turbolift's ascent. With a small discharge of sparks the turbolift started downward. The surprised

team leader quickly reached around the astonished technician and disabled the connection, leaving the turbolift stranded between decks. His venomous glare warned the technician that his next connection had better be the right one. The technician's next choice of terminals achieved the desired effect with the turbolift stopping on the detention area deck.

The Enterprise security team sent by Spock to investigate the intruder alert had guessed that Ksariss' cell would be the intruders' objective. The curious behavior of the turbolift had pointed to where the intruders would appear on the detention area deck. When the door of the turbolift opened the Romulan rescue team found itself confronted by half-a-dozen Enterprise security officers who opened fire first. Their first round of phaser fire floored the technician who had worked in the access panel. The three remaining Romulans were superb marksmen. Their return fire in short order left four members of the Enterprise's team lying on the deck. The two remaining Enterprise officers hastily withdrew behind a corner in the corridor leaving the door to the detention area unguarded from the outside. The Romulan team leader ordered his men to don gas masks, and when they were in place he tossed a repulsing gas grenade down the corridor to move the two surviving security officers farther back.

A member of the Romulan team took a position on each side of the detention area doorway while the third member moved to guard the corridor. A small charge of explosives was secured to the door and its timer was activated. As the two Romulans at the door rolled away, the charge went off and forced the door violently inward. As the smoke was clearing the two Romulan team members flung themselves through the opening while firing their disruptors. They blasted their way through the outer office to the inner chamber where the individual cells were located. One of the Romulans turned and fired into the outer office, forcing the remaining stunned security guards to retreat into the corridor where they were cut down by the third Romulan stationed there.

Ksariss had retreated behind the relative safety of the solid front wall of her cell and had cautiously monitored the battle in the detention area by occasionally peering out through the door's force field. The second Romulan in the inner chamber turned to her and ordered, "Stand back, Ambassador!" He then blasted the panel which controlled the force field across the cell door. When the force field had collapsed she sprinted out to join him. As she was supplied with a gas mask, a disruptor, and a transponder beacon the second Romulan smiled and said, "Compliments of Commander Kohbrah,

Ambassador."

"Right now all I require is to get out of here!" she icily returned.

The team leader watching the entrance to the cell block barked a command to the team member in the corridor who scurried in to rejoin his squad.

"Objective secured," said the team leader after activating his communicator. "Four to return."

The four Romulans vanished from the detention area cell block as Enterprise security reinforcements poured into the outer office.

---- CHAPTER FOUR ----

Spock continued to monitor events and reports from the Enterprise's detention section. Kirk was still preoccupied with the Romulan warship which was systematically destroying the remains of the Prinche Gayul still tumbling between it and the Enterprise. Kirk was withholding his response to the Talon's actions, fearful that any weapons activity on his part would complicate the job of his transporter officer

who was attempting to obtain a secure lock on the body of the transport's Captain before beaming him to the Enterprise.

Spock heard a final report from the security teams in the detention section. He decided that Kirk should be informed about what had happened.

"Captain, a Romulan contingent was beamed aboard our ship. It encountered one of our security teams outside the detention area. The Romulan force fought its way into the detention area and released the prisoner Ksariss from her cell. She and the Romulan contingent are no longer aboard the Enterprise. We have sustained several casualties, and Dr. McCoy has started treatment of our wounded in sick bay."

Kirk spun the command chair around, giving Spock a quick, probing glance. Inwardly he was furious. Everything he had tried to guard against had just happened to him. He stabbed at the buttons on the arm of the command chair, opening a channel to the transporter room.

"Transporter room, do you..."

"We have the survivor, Sir. He's on his way to sick bay."

"Shields up, Mr. Sulu! Mr. Chekov, get a lock on that Romulan ship and fire phasers when ready!"

* * *

Ksariss raced from the Talon's transporter room toward the bridge. As she neared the entrance to the ship's command center she heard the urgent voice of a man ordering, "Raise our shields, quickly!"

She was thrown against a wall and then to the deck as the ship pitched precariously. As her head cleared she realized that the Talon had been hit by the Enterprise's phasers. Either the shields had not been raised in time, or they had been only partially energized when the Enterprise had fired. Lighting aboard the Talon had dimmed to emergency levels. The ship's Chief Technician reported over the intercom, "Apologies, Commander Kohbrah, we cannot maintain ship's power." For whatever the reason, within the first minutes of having arrived aboard the Talon, Commander Kohbrah had made a less than favorable impression on Ksariss.

Ksariss entered the bridge holding her disruptor in

her hand and regarded the man who had come to rescue her. So this is Commander Kohbrah, she thought contemptuously. She strode to the side of his command chair and stood with her feet spread wide and her hands upon her hips. "Step down from your post, Commander!" she sternly directed.

It took a moment for the implications of Ksariss' command to work their way in through the other matters vying for attention in Kohbrah's mind. At last, astonished, he turned to her and said, "What?"

She grabbed a fistful of Kohbrah's black hair and forcefully pulled him to his feet beside the command chair. She then smashed her right fist which was firmly clamped around the handle of her disruptor into his face, leaning hard into the blow. Kohbrah crumpled to the deck. Like a cat Ksariss leaped over his unconscious form and dashed to the forward communications console. Abusing the switches, she managed to open a channel to the ship's engine room. "What is the status of our engines?" she demanded.

There was an uncomfortable pause - the Chief Technician had been expecting to hear Commander Kohbrah's voice. During the pause he reasoned that now was not the time to analyze. Their mission had been to rescue an important woman. Perhaps she had assumed command.

"Engine control circuits were burned by the partial phaser hit," explained the chief technician. "We are attempting to isolate the affected components. Ah - my men have just reported that the offending circuits have been identified and are being replaced."

"Make your men work faster," ordered Ksariss as she moved to the command chair. "Without power we'll all be killed here!"

"I have an incoming message from the Federation ship," the Communications Officer reported.

Ksariss leveled a shaking finger at him. "If you have the intelligence to follow an order, close down that channel! I will tolerate no interruptions from them!"

Ksariss glared at the image of the Enterprise on the Talon's screen willing it to understand that surrender was an option she was not even considering. She ordered the channel to the engine room reopened.

"What is taking so long back there?" she spit out while pounding on an arm of the command chair.

"The repaired systems must be tested before..."

"To the devil's pit with your testing!" screamed Ksariss. "Start engines NOW!"

Surviving the few seconds which followed Ksariss' inflamed directive to the engine technician caused each member of the Romulan crew to give thanks to the kind guardian spirit which had smiled upon their ship. Restarting the Talon's engines occurred without a single problem - a blessing not always bestowed upon this newest generation engine control system. With power generation restored, the Talon's shields were fully in place when the Enterprise's next volley of phaser fire came at them.

The Talon's shields did their job, protecting the ship from the full force of the Enterprise's phasers. For Ksariss, sitting in the command chair, this was not enough. She was still too near the Enterprise, and no nearer to the Neutral Zone. This annoying lack of progress further incensed her and she began punishing the arms of the command chair with both fists.

Commander Kohbrah had regained a moderate semblance of consciousness. He was propped up on his elbows beside the command chair, shaking his head and forcing his eyes open, all the while trying to piece together what had happened. Shifting his weight onto his right elbow he grasped the edge of the command chair arm with his left hand and attempted to pull himself up. As he drew his head and shoulders

above the arm of the command chair he saw Ksariss glowering down at him. She raised her disruptor and again brought it down abruptly onto his skull.

As Kohbrah sank again to the floor she leveled her disruptor at the navigator. "Determine a heading to the nearest point in Neutral Zone - quickly!"

* * *

As soon as the Enterprise's shields were up Chekov had dispatched a first volley of phaser fire at the Talon. The results were encouraging. Power readings from the Romulan ship steadily dropped to where the ship was only sustaining life support. Obviously the Romulans had been a little slow in raising their shields after beaming back their rescue team.

"Damage assessment, Mr. Spock," Kirk demanded without taking his eyes from the viewscreen.

"Sensors show a complete engine shutdown, Captain. The Romulan ship is functioning on battery power alone."

"Could this be a trick?" Kirk asked.

"Impossible to tell," said Spock as he first studied his instruments and then the viewscreen. "I should think that shutting down one's engines at this stage of an engagement would be a most illogical combat tactic."

"At this stage of the engagement it would not be the tactic I would use," Kirk agreed. No, there had to be another explanation. Something was wrong on the Romulan ship, and it was time to press his advantage before the Romulans fixed whatever their problem was. "Open a channel to that Romulan ship."

"The channel is open, Sir," Uhura responded.

"Attention, Romulan warship. This is Captain James T. Kirk, commanding the Federation Starship Enterprise. You have committed crimes and acts of aggression in Federation territory. You are ordered to shut down all weapons systems and surrender yourselves and your ship at once."

"No response, Sir," said Uhura. "Indications are that your transmission was blocked at their end."

"Captain, the Romulan ship's engines are coming back on line," reported Spock.

"Let's shut them down again, Mr. Chekov. Fire

phasers," ordered Kirk.

This time the Enterprise's phaser energy was deflected by fully functional shields. The Talon did not return fire. Instead, it started backing away from the position it had been holding. It then started a rapid starboard turn on its axis and accelerated away while its image wavered on the viewscreen and disappeared.

"Spock, can you pin down their heading?" demanded a frustrated Captain Kirk.

Spock called necessary sensor readings to his station. "Yes, Captain. They are leaving an extremely faint trail of ionization. The trail seems sufficiently undispersed to allow a degree of accuracy in determining a heading. It appears their destination... is the nearest point in the Neutral Zone."

Kirk was encouraged now that the odds had changed a little more in his favor. If his luck held, the Romulans would not get away unchallenged.

"Navigation and helm, take your information from Mr. Spock," said Kirk. "We shall pursue. Lt. Uhura, dispatch our status and intentions to Starfleet Command. Let's get underway, gentlemen!"

* * *

Ksariss had calmed herself. She was no longer teetering on the edge of uncontrollable rage. In fact she was quite pleased with her recent performance. She had done everything her senatorial mentor had taught her to do: boldly use rank and position, and act as though you are used to being obeyed. Her successful bid at assuming command of the Talon had not been challenged. Most likely it would not be. After all, she held the title and wielded the power of the newly created office of Ambassador-At-Large, and was a close friend of a powerful Senator. With her office and her associated connections she carried significantly more weight in the Senate and with the High Command than a mere warship commander. For the moment things were going well for Ksariss, and reluctantly she gave Kohbrah credit for some of that. He had obviously trained his crew to be obedient and reasonably efficient. They seemed capable of doing a job - once a strong hand had defined the requirements and parameters of that job. The Talon was currently speeding toward the security of the Neutral Zone with Ksariss secure in the belief that the Federation would not risk war with the Romulan Empire by entering the

Neutral Zone to retrieve an escaped spy.

Her thoughts returned to Kohbrah. She had ordered him bound and dragged off the bridge, charging him with refusing to relinquish command to a duly recognized superior. Though the crew had appeared uncomfortable with humiliating their Commander they had nonetheless followed her instructions and had stashed him safely for the time being in the ship's brig. An amusing inspiration crossed her mind, but before she could indulge it there was an important formality to dispose of.

"You, Security Officer," she said to one of the crewmen at the array of stations before the command chair, "do you show any sign of pursuit?"

"No, Ambassador. There is no sign of any ship within range of our sensors."

"Remain vigilant," Ksariss warned. "If I've learned anything about this Federation Captain Kirk, it is that he has a reputation for luck and tenacity. I'll wager we have not seen the last of him yet."

"Of course. As you wish, Ambassador."

Ksariss smiled. Now there was a young officer who knew how to adjust to a change in command.

Ksariss returned to the inspiration she had temporarily put aside. She mentally caressed it, and a mischievous smile stretched across her face. There were unresolved matters between Kohbrah and her -- matters she looked forward to dealing with, if the next senior officer could be trusted to watch the ship. Ksariss turned and studied the ship's Executive Officer intently. He became aware of her interest and managed the courage to return a quick glance at the Ambassador. Her probing eyes told him nothing, so he turned again to his duties, but, only for a moment. He had decided it was best to show the Ambassador that he was confident and not afraid of her. He met her eyes again and calmly asked, "Is there some service I might perform for you, Ambassador?"

Ksariss considered his question. She decided that for the present he could be trusted. "Yes, there is a small service I require. Take command of this rabble for a short time. And if you value your career, see to it that nothing goes wrong."

This woman has fire and spirit, thought the Executive Officer. Properly tempered, these qualities would make her an interesting companion. He decided that the best way to handle her for the moment was to humor her. He saluted as she vacated the command chair and headed for Kohbrah's

quarters behind the bridge.

The automatic door to Kohbrah's quarters opened with a quiet hiss. Ksariss stood half in the doorway and looked around. "Typical male trappings," she muttered to herself. She sat in the chair behind his desk, and for the first time was overcome by a feeling that there was some un-Romulan quality about the piece of furniture. She felt the side of the desk, paying attention to the texture of the natural material from which it was constructed. From the feel of the side panel she formed a theory which she further tested by sniffing the faint traces of oils on the tips of her fingers where they had rubbed along the desk. Of course, she congratulated herself, this is a Klingon desk. It was bad enough trading the Empire's latest technology to the Klingons; now the two empires were even trading furniture. She reached underneath the central panel and pressed the small button which activated the whisper quiet spring-loaded mechanism that ejected a weapon into her waiting hand. At least that mechanism had been modified to accommodate a Romulan disruptor. She examined the disruptor and moved its safety lever to its non-firing position before reinserting the weapon into its compartment and resetting the ejection mechanism. Ksariss gave the rest of the room a quick check for surprises. Finding no more, she returned to the desk and activated a

channel on the ship's intercom.

"Yes, Ambassador?"

"Have the prisoner Kohbrah brought to his former quarters."

"As you wish, Ambassador."

Within minutes two crewmembers had brought the manacled Kohbrah into what had until recently been his quarters, and had left him standing, disheveled, before Ksariss who was seated behind what had until recently been his desk.

"Leave us," Ksariss ordered as she fought to keep from smiling at Kohbrah's reactions to her comfortable presence behind his desk.

When they were alone she walked slowly around her humbled prisoner. "So, you have come before me to beg for my forgiveness," she said assuredly.

"We have never even met before. Why would I possibly require your forgiveness?" insisted Kohbrah.

"Why?!" Ksariss laughed. "Commander, you require my forgiveness because you have been so incredibly stupid – that is 'why'!"

There was no hiding the fact that Kohbrah was completely ignorant of whatever Ksariss was referring to. Kohbrah's lack of understanding greatly amused Ksariss, who now anticipated that exposing Kohbrah's folly to him would be as entertaining as she had envisioned while occupying the command chair on the bridge.

"Yes! Yes, Commander Kohbrah, you have behaved as stupidly, and you have been as lacking in foresight as those Federation fools who doubted my inevitable liberation," she bubbled while rising and moving to the side of the desk. "To explain I shall tell you a story."

Ksariss settled comfortably onto the edge of the desk before beginning. "While my Federation captors were attempting to assemble witnesses for my trial I was visited by one of my Romulan lawyers. It was she who actually told me a story, and it was related to her by her brother who is, like yourself, an officer on a warship."

"It seems," she continued, "that her brother was in the company of fellow officers celebrating some accomplishment or other at a drinking establishment near their fleet base. While celebrating they made the acquaintance of a certain warship Commander who was patronizing the same establishment. It was their

opinion that if they had not convinced this warship Commander to share some of his war stories he would have selfishly emptied all the spirits from the establishment's shelves by himself. This Commander was bursting with pride at having been chosen to liberate a certain captured Romulan diplomat. Over the course of the evening this Commander's lips became lubricated with the essences of a number of exotic spirits, and he freely discussed the rewards he expected to reap upon the successful completion of his mission. He prophesied for himself newfound wealth, and promotions for bravery, and... marriage."

Ksariss had spoken the word 'marriage' as if uttering it had left a very unpleasant taste in her mouth. "Oh, I do apologize," she added with a pronounced lack of sincerity, "I neglected to mention that the captured diplomat was a beautiful woman!"

At this point Ksariss was pleased to see the dawn of understanding on Kohbrah's face. Now that he had an idea of where the rest of the story was heading it would hurt him even more as she drove a few stinging points home.

"You were that drunken Commander!" she shouted, leveling an accusing finger at him. "You desired wealth and promotions for rescuing me? Those rewards I would have gladly arranged. But -

marriage? I do not enter so easily into a marriage! I have no desire to be cast aside after chauvinistic Romulan law and customs grant my husband control over my wealth and estates!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Ksariss painfully remembered how that very thing had happened to her mother. In her youth Mother had been beautiful, rich, vibrant, and happy. After the death of her parents she had become somewhat rebellious, and against the wishes of the rest of her family she had started living with a young man, a steel-eyed handsome, ambitious lawyer and politician with enough promise and connections to rise to the top of his profession.

In time the young rebellious woman found herself with child. Out of feelings of obligation, and under pressure from his professional superiors to do the honorable thing, the lawyer had married the mother of his child.

Ksariss was born, and Mother believed that there could be no greater joy than caring for her child. She was certain that everything that could be desired of life was now eternally hers. She threw herself so completely into providing and caring for her new treasure that she was completely oblivious to what

her treacherous husband was doing behind her back.

At a steady pace Father had begun transferring control of parcels of Mother's estates to himself. By the time Mother had finally understood what had been happening there was very little left in her name.

Furiously Mother had sued for divorce, and she had tried to regain what she felt was morally hers through the courts. Her legal battles lasted for years and her remaining resources were used to pay legal fees. As soon as her money was gone her lawyers had urged her to settle the affair under terms which allotted her a pittance of a pension from her former husband.

After that, Ksariss had lived very modestly with her mother. She had spent many nights alone and crying, devising fanciful plans to right the wrongs her mother had suffered. Mother finally died on the brink of poverty.

After Mother's passing Ksariss had been forced to make a peace of sorts with Father as she had no means to support herself and nowhere else to live. Father had taken her in and had put her through school, but the relationship between them had remained distant and chilled. When Father finally died she felt little remorse.

As she saw things, the male-dominated courts had failed to protect her mother. Mother's male lawyers had been only too happy to accept their fees from her, but when the money had run out, so had their interest in her case. While growing up Ksariss had learned a few things about power, and about the concepts of right and wrong. She understood the wisdom expressed in the ancient adages: 'might is right', and 'real power is what you take'.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Ksariss withdrew her disruptor and gazed at it as if it was somehow seducing her.

"Marriage?" she said wistfully to Kobrah. "I should very much like to blast you into pieces too small to hold thoughts of such effrontery!"

After another moment of gazing she returned the disruptor to its holster. "I am restraining myself," she added, "because you have exhibited some redeeming qualities. You did well in disposing of the witnesses who incriminated me. Your battle plan against the Enterprise caught them completely off guard. And, your crew is well trained. I express my gratitude for these things. Since you have some skill in organizing and running this warship, you will serve me in a capacity of second-in-command until we reach a base

in the Empire. After examining my reports your superiors may then decide on your fitness for command. Do not congratulate yourself on your good fortune by virtue of my clemency, Commander, because I must still serve you with an official reprimand. It would be best for you to curb your passion for overindulging in strong drink. This vice has, more than anything, led to your current downfall."

Kohbrah's gaze was fixed into a corner. Inside he was punishing himself for the indiscretions that had led to the humiliation to which he was now subjected. Ksariss sat behind the desk and again summoned the bridge.

"What do you wish, Ambassador?" responded the intercom.

"I wish to confer with the ship's Executive Officer," she said.

"I have informed him, Ambassador. He is on his way."

When he entered Ksariss' new quarters she was seated on the corner of her Klingon desk. "Summon security personnel and have the restraints removed from Commander Kohbrah," she ordered. "He will

serve me as second-in-command, overseeing the operation of all routine ship's matters. On all non-routine matters, I am to be consulted. Is that understood?"

The Executive Officer glanced at Kohbrah, and then indicated his understanding of the changed command hierarchy. He then left to carry out his orders. The restraints were removed from Kohbrah's wrists by crewmen who arrived several minutes later. Kohbrah massaged his wrists and felt the circulation returning to his fingers.

Suddenly the lights went out, leaving everyone immersed in a complete and oppressive darkness and a dead silence. No emergency lighting, no intercom, no alarms, and no engine noise. In a few minutes the shouting of crewmen pervaded the dark as some tried to communicate, to organize, to understand, and if possible to reverse the complete loss of power before the indigenous cold of deep space claimed the inside of the ship.

* * *

The trail of ionization left by the fleeing Talon was not easy to follow. Spock had warned that dispersion of the trace particles emitted by the Romulan ship would complicate the process of verifying its course. If the Romulans had tried some kind of evasive maneuvers the dispersion factor would have made tracking the Talon virtually impossible, but Spock's computers were indicating a high probability that the Romulan ship was holding to a straight line and running a high speed sprint for the safety of the Romulan Neutral Zone.

Kirk was mulling over his options. Presently the Enterprise was in pursuit at warp seven - about as fast as the warp engines could be pushed for any length of time without risking overheating and having to break off pursuit. There was a small chance that the Enterprise could accelerate to warp eight and attempt to close on the Talon, but if the Romulan ship had a speed reserve to match, it would be anybody's guess which vessel would have to slow down first. Tracking the cloaked Romulan ship at warp seven had slightly compromised the accuracy of Spock's computers. Someone had remarked that at warp eight they would do better attempting visual tracking of the cloaked ship. A less frivolous observation was made that if the Romulans were forced to warp eight and then executed evasive maneuvers it would take a miracle to

detect them again. Kirk was convinced that pursuing at warp seven was getting them nowhere. He was certain that the Romulan ship would not turn from its beeline heading. He was almost ready to switch to the warp eight option, but before subjecting Chief Engineer Scott's engines to such torture he decided to give Starfleet Command one more chance to help in recapturing Ksariss.

"Lieutenant Uhura, has there been any response to our request for assistance?"

"Yes, Sir. I have just finished unscrambling Starfleet's response."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Let's see what they have to say."

Uhura replayed the decoded tape on the viewscreen. The grey-haired sector commander appeared and spoke to Kirk. "Starfleet Command has reviewed your situation, Captain Kirk. They are in agreement there was nothing more you could have done under the circumstances. As to your request for assistance, regrettably there are no vessels in a position to help intercept the Romulan ship. Starfleet Command places great importance in regaining custody of Ksariss. They have reassured me that they will back you in whatever you decide to do. Good

luck, Captain."

Kirk stroked his chin. The Enterprise was on its own and its best chance of success lay in going with the warp eight option. From the arm of the command chair Kirk opened a channel to Engineering. "Scotty, report on the status of the warp engines."

"At the moment, Sir, as good as they can be."

Kirk knew his Chief Engineer would not like to hear what was going to happen. "I'll have to apologize in advance, Scotty. Starfleet wants our former guest back. It means pushing everything to the absolute limit. Everything you can give us, and maybe a little more."

"Understood, Captain. I'll have the lads throw an extra shovel of coal on the fire."

Kirk smiled as he turned to Spock. "Is there any change in the Romulans' heading, Mr. Spock?"

"No detectable change, Captain."

Kirk faced the viewscreen. "Mr. Sulu, bring us to warp eight. Hold our present heading."

The warp engines groaned to a higher pitch and the stars on the viewscreen raced by at a noticeably faster

pace. The engineer monitoring readings at the bridge's engineering station soon started casting nervous glances over his shoulder at Kirk. Out of the corner of his eye Kirk saw this happening. Scotty is probably monitoring the same readings in Engineering, he thought. Scotty and his engines had survived maximum output incidents like this before. As Chief Engineer, Scotty knew that the absolute limits of his engines' capabilities were slightly in excess of the figures published in Starfleet's technical manuals. Kirk trusted that there was no cause for alarm until Scotty, himself, voiced concern.

"Captain," said Spock, "there is a small distortion on the viewscreen. Apparently we are closing on the Talon."

Kirk saw the tiny area of distortion which Spock had pointed out. Again he called engineering. "Scotty, can we push those engines a little harder?"

Mr. Scott responded, but Kirk never heard what his Chief Engineer had said. A ridiculously dressed man playing a harpsichord in front of the viewscreen was making entirely too much noise.

---- CHAPTER FIVE ----

"Tallyho! Greetings and felicitations, my good friends! How I have missed you, one and all!" gleefully exclaimed the harpsichordist as he appraised his audience while his hands appeared to dance expertly over the keyboard of his instrument. He was dressed in a rich blue jacket highlighted by an abundance of gold embroidery and lace-edged sleeves. A row of bright medals was suspended from colorful ribbons hanging in perfect alignment on the left side of his chest, and a brilliant white cravat hung from around his neck to adorn the front of his jacket. High polished black boots complemented his grey breeches.

Each crewman on the Enterprise's bridge stared, astounded by the unexpected appearance of the eager, bubbling performer and his centuries-old instrument. The air was filled with the tinkling of the harpsichord as it produced strains of music that brought to mind the works of the most celebrated of Earth's classical composers.

Kirk was the first to break the silence following the end of the harpsichordist's unsolicited performance when he stood and in profound disbelief uttered, "Trelane?"

"Oh, you do remember, Captain! That is most

gratifying!" beamed Trelane as he stepped in front of the harpsichord and executed a very broad bow. Unanticipated silence brought him back to an erect stance, and he looked about the bridge with his hands outstretched in disbelief.

"No applause? After a performance of that caliber?" he insisted. After fixing his eyes on Kirk he pouted, "I must say your manners have not improved appreciably since last we met!"

The Enterprise's first encounter with Trelane, The Squire of Gothos, passed through Kirk's mind. Trelane, the child-creature with a passion for experiencing Earth's history, especially its military history, had proved to be more of a handful than the Enterprise had been capable of handling. Had it not been for the timely intervention of Trelane's parents, the ship and its crew might still be trapped on Gothos, powerless to end their being retained as playthings by an omnipotent juvenile delinquent. The only thing that had seemed to have any effect on Trelane was standing up to him, not knuckling under to his flaunted superiority. It had always taken Trelane a little time to figure out what to do when Kirk had not played Trelane's games by Trelane's rules.

"I might say the same thing about your manners," Kirk accused. "You were not invited aboard my ship."

"You wound me to the quick, Captain!" lamented Trelane. "Did I not freely extend my hospitality to you on my estate on Gothos? After such unbridled generosity on my part, is it not expected that I would be entreated to visit your humble home in the stars?"

"What you offered to me and my crew on Gothos was perpetual imprisonment!" declared Kirk. "You attempted to force your 'hospitality' on my ship. I can honestly say that after having made your acquaintance I would not invite you to visit my humble home in the stars if you and I were the last two lonely sentient beings in the entire universe!"

"Oh," responded Trelane, momentarily taken aback by Kirk's terseness. However, only a moment later a self-satisfied smile settled onto Trelane's face, and he observed, "Well, that really doesn't seem to matter now, does it? I quite apparently am here anyway!"

Kirk was about to respond when Spock counseled, "Captain, it might be better to remember the man."

"Oh, please, you ill-mannered subordinate Vulcan, hold your tongue," said Trelane arrogantly to Spock. "Your good Captain and I were having this conversation."

Kirk ignored Trelane's rebuff against Spock as he

tried to extract Spock's hidden meaning from his suggestion. Remember the man. Trelane isn't a man, thought Kirk. Then, as that thought had crossed his mind, Kirk had understood. He was not attempting to deal with a rational adult, but with a precocious child.

Kirk took a step toward Trelane to draw his attention away from Spock and then tried a softer approach. "Trelane," he said, forcing a smile, "I think I know what you want. Perhaps you would like us to visit with you a while, maybe play some games, maybe reenact some fascinating old battles. The problem with that is that we are really busy at the moment. So we don't have the time, uh - at the present, that is, for your hobbies or games..."

"But you misjudge me, Mon Capitaine," interrupted Trelane, delighted that Kirk had no idea why he had visited the Enterprise. "What I have planned for us is not so juvenile as merely playing a few games. In any event, your concern about that ship you were chasing is unwarranted. It won't be going anywhere, and neither will you. At least, not until I am ready."

"Ready? Ready for what?" demanded Kirk, reverting to his hard line approach to dealing with Trelane. He managed a quick scan of several instruments which verified that the Enterprise and the Talon were motionless in space.

"You know, you really can be quite rude, Captain," admonished Trelane. "This would be much more interesting if you were to ask me what I have been doing with myself recently."

Kirk glared at Trelane, wishing for a way to sweep him off the ship.

"For instance, have you noticed that I've grown?" suggested Trelane as he spun gracefully around. Kirk still glared, silently.

"No, perhaps you haven't," conceded Trelane disappointedly. "You wouldn't know what to look for." With his finger on his chin Trelane thought for a moment, and then brightly proposed, "Perhaps you have noticed that this time I have been performing my wonders without the aid of mirrors?"

Trelane's face fell into despair when Kirk ignored his question. "Captain Kirk! Please, you must ask me what I have been doing! Everything depends on it!" he pleaded.

"And if I don't ask, will you go away?" Kirk responded impatiently.

"Oh, you will ask, Captain," returned Trelane smugly. "One way or another, you... will... ask!"

Kirk saw that Trelane was growing a little tense, and that he was determined to have his way on this point. Rather than have Trelane lose his temper and do something outrageous to the entire crew he decided to give in. "Alright, Trelane, what have you been doing with yourself recently?"

Trelane started to bubble over with excitement, finally having the exact opening he had so greatly desired. He eagerly rubbed his hands together and cast his eyes upward as he searched for just the right words.

"Do you remember my telling you that the study of your fascinating planet and species is my all-consuming divertissement?"

Kirk said nothing.

"Of course you do," Trelane continued, only momentarily slowed by Kirk's show of indifference. "You cannot possibly know how thrilling it was to encounter actual specimens from one of my favorite planets passing through the neighborhood of my estate on Gothos. I was all but shattered when you spurned my hospitality. Not only did you shatter my spirit, Captain, you intentionally did the same to the great mirror in my castle's entertainment hall. And when I demanded just recompense of you, you

betrayed me to my mother and father. I'll never know how you made them believe your misrepresentations, but the result of your defamation was that my best toys were taken away."

"We can only hope that your punishment taught you something about responsibility," interjected Kirk.

"Quite the contrary, Captain," Trelane smiled. "You see, I have acquired some new toys. In many ways they are much, much better toys."

A disquieting possibility was forming in Kirk's mind that Trelane intended to demonstrate how his recent acquisitions were superior to the devices he had used on Gothos.

"Captain Kirk and crewmen of the Enterprise, I simply cannot keep this good news to myself any longer," exclaimed Trelane as he looked excitedly at each crewman on the bridge. "With the aid of my new equipment I have seen your twentieth century. Industrialization and pollution. Motion pictures, television, The Beatles, and Woodstock. And not to forget, those glorious wars between the governments of your entire planet! I especially enjoyed that scientist with the long hair. What was his name...? Einstein! Yes, Albert Einstein, who revealed to you the secrets of time, space, and matter. For a human being,

he was a person of exceptional insight. When I considered the reverence in which he was held I could not, at first, understand why he would involve himself with the author of the book which lay open on his desk at the time of his death. Fortunately I was able to locate and examine a copy of that book. It was simply fascinating! As I came to understand its subject material from the writer's point of view, the format for a wonderful new game opened before me. In fact, we shall all soon play my new game, and it will teach you all a very... important... lesson!"

Trelane looked around the bridge, verifying that he had everyone's attention. He brushed an imagined piece of lint from the sleeve of his uniform coat, and when he was satisfied that he looked his absolute best he strode purposefully around the navigation console and stood toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye with James Kirk, the Captain of the Enterprise.

From somewhere Trelane produced a pair of leather gloves which he held tightly in his right hand. He smartly took a single step back, raised the gloves, and with a quick left-right snap of his wrist slapped Kirk hard on each cheek. "You are a cheater!" he proclaimed to Kirk as he cast the gloves onto the deck at Kirk's feet. "You came into my home and disgraced me in front of my family when you broke the rules to

my games. I was supposed to win! Now I am going to make it so that you, and none of your cheater friends, can ever again keep me from winning!"

Trelane leaned into Kirk's face an extra second for theatrical impact, and then, in the blink of an eye, Trelane and the harpsichord vanished from the bridge of the Enterprise. In the instant which followed, both the Enterprise and the Talon disappeared from where their wild dash to the Neutral Zone had been brought to an abrupt, unforeseen halt.

---- CHAPTER SIX ----

Unsure of how long she had been unconscious, Ksariss opened her eyes and let them adjust to the unexpected dim light. Except for a barely discernable suggestion of noise beside her, the ship was as still as a tomb. She slowly rolled her head to the side and saw Kohbrah lying next to her face down on the floor. He was mumbling quietly and incoherently to himself, a sign that he would soon regain consciousness. The air around her did not appear to have cooled to any great degree, which when considering the power blackout the ship had experienced, suggested that her

period of unconsciousness had been relatively short.

Ksariss was determined to be the first on her feet, ready to give orders to the first subordinate who was able to respond. It would be little things like that, she felt, which would eventually define her in the eyes of the rest of the crew as a person of superior resilience and fortitude.

She managed to sit up by forcing all her will into the effort and was rewarded with a pounding headache and an overpowering feeling of dizziness. She cursed the pain and the dizziness, wishing she could bequeath them both to Kohbrah. It would be a gift he richly deserved.

By supporting herself on the desk she made it to her feet. She experienced a new wave of dizziness which dissipated faster than the first. When she was sure she could keep her balance she staggered to the door, and for the first time fully realized that the dim light in the room and in the corridor outside was the ship's low intensity red emergency lighting. If there was lighting, she deduced, then obviously partial power had been restored. But if partial power was available, did that mean that some environmental systems might also be functioning? If that was the case, she might have been unconscious longer than she had first believed.

She braced herself on the wall as she slowly made her way to the bridge. There she found the bridge crewmembers in the same condition as Kohbrah. The executive officer was sprawled in the command chair. She tried to remove him, but found that she lacked the strength. Then she noticed that the chair at the navigation console was vacant, its former occupant slumped on the floor beside it. She let herself down onto this chair resting her arm on the back so that it could help support her head.

As she breathed deeply she felt the fog in her head clearing and the pain of the headache becoming sharper. She spied a medical emergency cabinet and arose to walk toward it. In the cabinet was a container which held prepackaged processed portions of an herb native to Romulus which was widely used as an analgesic. She opened a packet and threw the enclosed portion of the herb into her mouth. Several minutes of chewing released the herb's inherent medicinal agents and vapors which greatly lessened the discomfort of her headache.

Ksariss' thoughts began to focus more and more on the condition of the ship. Everything she had seen and heard since regaining consciousness convinced her that she was the first to be up and moving about. If she assumed this was true, she was left without an

answer to the perplexing question of who had turned on the emergency lighting. Unable to easily answer the question she put it aside. Perhaps she would have Kohbrah or one of his underlings investigate the matter later. At the moment it was more important to get moving again toward the Neutral Zone.

Several crewmembers around the bridge had recovered enough to sit up or lean against the nearest structure capable of supporting them. Ksariss began distributing packets of the analgesic herb to these crewmen, not through any compassion or kindness, but to hasten the return of the ship to proper running order. As Ksariss next traveled throughout the rest of the ship dispensing the analgesic packets she began to wonder what had happened to the Enterprise. Had Kirk been responsible for the blackout, or had the same phenomenon affected his Federation ship also?

She hurried back toward the bridge to start collecting answers. Meanwhile, with great effort, Kohbrah had made it to his feet and had staggered into the corridor and toward the bridge. He was leaning on the bulkhead at the entrance when Ksariss brushed past him handing him a container of herb packets as she did so. Kohbrah peered hopefully into the container. It was empty.

Ksariss positioned herself in front of the command

chair which still held the groggy bulk of the executive officer who was slowly chewing his portion of the analgesic herb.

"Do you have a name?" Ksariss inquired in the most disdainful voice she could invoke.

"I am called Tarsus. Subcommander Tarsus," weakly replied the executive officer between the hands covering his face.

"Well, Subcommander Tarsus, are you attempting to unseat me as commander of this vessel, or are you merely wallowing in characteristic masculine self-pity?"

Tarsus opened his hands slightly, peering out to verify if Ksariss' spiteful inquiry was serious. Seeing that, indeed, it was, he angrily grumbled, "A thousand pardons - Sir!" He struggled out of the command chair and stood well behind it, hoping that Ksariss would not pay him too much attention, at least not until the analgesic herb had done its work.

Ksariss took the command chair and began working on getting the ship's affairs in order. After opening a communications channel she called, "Engine room, this is the bridge. I want a full report on our status."

"Engine room, Sir. The ship is on emergency battery power. As far as we have been able to determine, none of our systems were damaged by what happened, but we need to initiate a cold restart of our warp engines. Since we cannot determine what caused the shutdown, it is vitally important that a full battery of tests be run before attempting to restart."

Ksariss' hands tightened on the arms of the command chair reflecting how she felt about another delay. "Very well," she reluctantly allowed, "do what you must, but do it as quickly as you can. Does the ship have impulse capability?"

"Yes, Sir. Full impulse capability."

"My gratitude for that," responded Ksariss sarcastically. "Bring the impulse engines on line - and do something about more lighting up here!"

"We'll get right on it, Sir."

Ksariss was relieved to see that all the duty stations on the bridge were now manned. "Navigation Officer, what is the estimated time to the Neutral Zone at full impulse power?" she asked.

As the lighting on the bridge returned to normal the navigation officer entered instructions into his

computer. Instead of responding with the requested data it emitted an obscene noise, indicating that it was not comfortable with what it was being asked to do. He rechecked his figures and programming before attempting to reenter them. Again the computer balked. Astounded and fearful, he turned to Ksariss and said, "Sir, we are not where we were."

"What do you mean?" Ksariss frowned.

"Sir, we are nowhere near the coordinates we occupied before the power blackout. I cannot explain why, Sir, but we are - lost. It will take time for the computers to derive our new location."

Even the air on the bridge seemed to recoil from the fresh tirade of curses from Ksariss, and the longsuffering arms of the command chair vibrated again under her fury. Thrusting her head and neck menacingly forward she screamed, "Where is Kirk and his Enterprise?"

"We are the only vessel within range of our sensors."

In spite of her apparent freedom from Kirk for the moment, Ksariss was still boiling! Powerful feelings of frustration needed to be vented on someone, and having no clearly guilty scapegoat had agitated her

turmoil to the limits of control.

Commander Kohbrah had been standing silently at the back of the bridge studying everything that had happened. He stepped forward and said to the navigation officer, "Thank you. I believe you have given us all the information you have. Now we should all apply ourselves to determining our present location."

Ksariss turned around, and her eyes were literally spitting fire at Kohbrah. She clearly did not like his interference in her command decisions. However, she said nothing and quietly faced forward resting her right elbow on the arm of the command chair and her chin on her right thumb. Sulking to herself she admitted that she had held her tongue and had not reprimanded Kohbrah because at the moment there really was no better course of action.

* * *

Vulcans possess a constitution of near legendary robustness. Perhaps more than anything, this was why Spock was the first of the Enterprise

crew to regain consciousness. He remembered that Trelane had disappeared, and then, after half-perceived sensations of sudden rapid motion and disorientation, everything had lapsed into blackness. Everyone else on the bridge was unconscious and lying where they had fallen, either from chairs or from where they had been standing. Some showed signs of injury. Spock opened a channel to sick bay. "Spock to Doctor McCoy. Are you able to respond?"

There was no answer. Spock decided his first priority was the safety of the ship, and to insure that he needed to know where the Romulan warship was. A quick scan of the instruments told him that the Enterprise was the only ship in the immediate area. He looked over his shoulder at the forward viewscreen and examined the star field. Something about it did not look right. It was very different from the star field that had been displayed as they had encountered Trelane, and it did not quite match any of the celestial views he associated with the Starfleet worlds he often visited, and yet there was an elusive quality of familiarity about it he could not place. He channeled information from the communications station to his science console and quickly discovered that all Starfleet and civilian communication bands were silent. He would not be able to determine their location from Starfleet navigation aids. The ship was

simply lost, but in no apparent danger.

Having established that the ship was for the time being safe, Spock became more concerned about the condition of the crew. He decided that the ship's computers, if they were functioning properly, could deal with the problem of the ship's location. After the computers had passed several quick tests he set them to work on this task.

Spock next scanned the entire ship and learned that the entire crew was still unconscious. The scans had showed no signs of life-threatening injuries, but there were still a number that would require some attention from Dr. McCoy.

Spock retrieved the bridge's emergency medical kit and carried it to the command chair. He knelt beside Kirk, opened the kit, and found a vial labeled as a stimulant. He loaded the vial into a hypospray and administered the prescribed dosage into Kirk's upper arm. A moment later Kirk's eyes blinked, and he succeeded in propping himself up against the base of the command chair. He stared at Spock with eyes seeking answers to a thousand questions. As he made his first unsuccessful attempts to say something Spock heard a number of low, anguished moans from around the bridge.

"What - happened, Spock?" Kirk asked with difficulty.

"I am uncertain, Captain," Spock replied as he scanned Kirk with the tricorder from the medical kit. "Trelane vanished shortly before a great force took hold of the ship. I am certain I felt that before losing consciousness myself. It appears that the ship has been moved to an undetermined location, and of the crew, you and I are the only ones who are conscious."

"That brat sure knows how to have a tantrum," Kirk observed as he uncomfortably adjusted his position. "How badly were we shaken up?" he asked a moment later. "Where's the Romulan ship?"

"According to the scans I have made, our ship does not appear to have been damaged," Spock replied. "I have been unable to locate the Romulan ship, visually, or on our scanners."

There was a distracting hiss from the turbolift doors as they opened. Dr. McCoy and two assistants burst onto the bridge, McCoy going directly to Kirk and the assistants to other crewmen.

McCoy covered Kirk's entire body with his medical scanners. "I see you've already had your shots," he quipped after a thorough examination.

"Yes," Kirk smiled slightly, "my First Officer has apparently been playing 'doctor' in your absence."

"Practicing medicine again without a license, Mr. Spock?" McCoy asked with a quick, sly glance at the First Officer.

"I am quite knowledgeable about many aspects of human physiology, Doctor," replied Spock in his own defense, "and it was imperative to have the Captain..."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," interrupted McCoy as he prepared a second hypo for Kirk. "I'd ask the Captain to put you in for a commendation, but right now I have about four-hundred more crewmen to examine. Jim, if you feel as badly as I did a few minutes ago you'll need a shot of this for the headache and dizziness you're not telling me about. Trust me, it will help."

Kirk gratefully accepted the offered medication. McCoy had been correct about the symptoms. Kirk had been hoping they would just go away.

McCoy placed the hypo against Spock's arm and asked, "Care for a little of one of my noxious potions, Spock?"

"No, thank you, Doctor," replied Spock. "Everything

is well under control."

"It's just as well," said McCoy as he placed the hypo back in his medical kit. "Everybody's complaining about headache and dizziness. I just hope I have enough of this stuff on hand to go around."

By the time McCoy and his team of assistants had left the bridge Kirk's medication had started to take effect. The helm and navigation consoles actually stayed in one place when he looked at them, so he carefully seated himself in the command chair. Other crewmembers were also returning to their jobs. The Enterprise was coming back to life.

After allowing a few more minutes for his medication to work, Kirk contacted Lt. Commander Scott in engineering. He listened to Scott's reports which verified Spock's assertion that the ship was undamaged. They then began discussing a restart of the warp engines. Spock had been busy at his science station, studying readings being fed to the computers when he noticed an uncharacteristic flicker in the computer display. Suddenly an alarm sounded throughout the ship. It was the same alarm heard when Ksariss' rescuers had been beamed on board.

"Intruder alert, Captain," Spock reported. Then a puzzled expression clouded his face as he added,

"Ship's sensors cannot determine the location of the intrusion."

"Security," said Kirk after opening his own channel, "this is the Captain. I want all available security personnel conducting an all-decks search for intruders. Set phasers initially on heavy stun, but go to higher settings if necessary. Kirk out."

"Captain, I have just monitored some unusual activity from the computer," Spock reported.

"In what way, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk.

"The computer has cancelled the intruder alert. It now reports that all conditions are normal."

"Has the computer been accessed through any input channel other than yours?" asked Kirk.

"No, Captain. I have already checked for that possibility."

"Subspace fields, then. Or some previously unknown energy field?" Kirk suggested.

"I have detected nothing out of the ordinary," replied Spock.

"Then what could have triggered a false intruder

alert?" demanded Kirk.

"Unknown, Captain. There is no readily available data from which to draw conclusions."

"Continue checking your equipment, Mr. Spock. I'll get back to you," Kirk ordered. "Kirk to Security," he continued, "give me a report on the search for intruders."

"Yes, Sir," replied the security chief, "we have reports from all but a few of the lower decks, all negative. If you ask me, Sir, we're not going to find anything."

"I'll entertain opinions after you've completed your search," said Kirk. "Carry on."

Spock intruded on Kirk's thoughts. "Captain, the computers are all functioning properly, but I have discovered several additional anomalies. Personnel records indicate that our crew compliment has increased by one. Our access-protected backup records support this development."

"If the records have been altered, how do you know we have an extra person on board?" questioned Kirk.

"As a security precaution before our departure from Ketrige Alpha I verified the number of persons

assigned to this ship," calmly explained Spock. "There were a corresponding number of personnel files in our computer memory banks. I know the number of crewmen we departed with, and the number of personnel files on record at that time. The number of personnel files has increased by one."

"Could one of the files simply be a copy of another?" asked Kirk.

A moment later Spock replied, "The computer verifies that none of the personnel files matches another."

"Then, how many people are aboard this ship?"

After instructing the computer to conduct a ship-wide scan Spock reported, "One more than when we departed Ketrige Alpha."

"Speculate, Spock," Kirk implored, "how could someone get aboard this ship AND change our computer records to mask his presence?"

"Security to Captain Kirk."

"Kirk here," he replied testily.

"Sir, my people have covered this entire ship. We've poked into every hole and hiding place there is.

We've checked personnel identifications and verified them against records. Sir, there is nobody aboard this ship who doesn't belong here."

"Thank you, Security," said Kirk. After a moment's thought he added, "This ship is going to stay at red alert until we start getting some answers that make sense."

Spock found himself the object of a moment's careful study by Kirk. "Well, Mr. Spock, it seems to me that we are left with several intriguing problems. We have lost a very important prisoner. We, ourselves, are lost. We have experienced an intruder alert with no intruder, and, our computer which thinks we have an extra crewman is trying to figure out where we are."

Spock's face remained impassive. Kirk slowly turned around and quietly gazed at the viewscreen, reminding himself that he had harbored a bad feeling about this Ksariss business since the day it had started.

---- CHAPTER SEVEN ----

Commander Kohbrah entered the Talon's bridge and stopped just inside the entryway. He was returning with a report from the most recent piece of humiliating, pointless busywork assigned to him by Ambassador Ksariss. As instructed, he had interviewed each crewmember on the ship, hoping to discover for the Ambassador who had restored partial power after the blackout, an assignment of a type that both he and his crew knew would normally have been delegated to one of the ship's junior officers. The substance of his report was that nobody had claimed credit for the deed. Kohbrah was certain that Ksariss was not so much interested in identifying a hero as she was in again demonstrating to the crew that even the ship's Commander was obligated to bow to her will. Kohbrah was rapidly tiring of the Ambassador's abusive and pompous reign of terror over his ship, and so was his crew. He remembered the frustrated engine room technician who had quietly asked him, "How much longer, Sir?"

"I am not sure that I understand your question," he had replied.

"The Ambassador, Sir. How much longer...?"

Kohbrah had then successfully repressed an urge to

smile. Sternly he had replied, "Until she is by due process relieved of command," before departing from the engine room.

He saw that Ksariss was in the command chair, only her right shoulder and part of the back of her head visible from where he was standing. She seemed to be leaning to the side, supporting her chin, and concentrating on something. Perhaps some of the crewmen at the forward stations had finally begun to determine where the ship was currently located. It was about time somebody came up with something, he mused. The ship had remained in the same position for hours without reference points upon which to base a heading. In short, they were still lost and afraid to move.

Kohbrah decided to risk a quick sweep of the forward stations before delivering his report to Ksariss. If she objected to his priorities she would not keep her disapproval a secret for long. Ignoring Ksariss, he approached the right side of the curved line of forward stations and began his inspections of the instruments and readouts. His attention was diverted by a movement within a cluster of officers who had congregated to study a data printout. One of the seated officers had fallen asleep and had been shaken by a concerned comrade who had then

discreetly cocked his head in the direction of the command chair when the dozing officer had regained his bearings. Kohbrah began to calculate how long the obviously overextended officers might have been on duty. At the point his calculations had explained why the ship's duty officers were falling asleep at their posts he was distracted by a loud snort from the direction of the command chair. Ksariss, herself, was asleep on the bridge.

A single word - enough - was Kohbrah's reaction to the situation. He sharply slapped his open hand onto the surface of the console beside him creating a crack that echoed throughout the bridge.

"This is not right, Ambassador!" Kohbrah shouted toward the command chair. Ksariss bolted upright, snapping her head from left to right, seeking the source of the report that had startled her. "Look at these crewmen. They are so fatigued they are putting more effort into just keeping awake than into their duties. You, Ambassador, are asleep while in command on the bridge! What would happen if at this moment we encountered the Enterprise? If James Kirk could beam over here alone and recapture you, you wouldn't even know it had happened until you awakened in his ship's brig!"

"Alright, Commander! You have said quite

enough!" Ksariss angrily returned before rubbing her eyes. After a moment she appeared more calm. "Your points are valid. Assemble a relief crew and have them take over. Then I will have a word with you in private."

Within minutes Kohbrah had summoned replacements to the bridge. As they nervously occupied the stations before Ksariss in the command chair, the officers who had been relieved gratefully trudged off the bridge and toward their quarters. Ksariss then arose and slowly moved toward the doorway, stopping beside it before leaving the bridge. She beckoned to Kohbrah, indicating that he should join her where she stood. When he had come to stand before her she said, "I also require rest, Commander. The ship is yours until I return. If our location is determined I am to be notified immediately. Before I go, I'd like to add this: it's no secret that I don't like you. Don't let that fact inspire you to do anything foolish. I swear I'll return from my grave to avenge anything that happens to me."

Ksariss then confidently smiled, turned, and sashayed down the corridor.

Madam, thought Kohbrah, attempting to put you into a grave would be a waste of time. No grave in its right mind would have you.

Temporarily in command of his own ship, Kohbrah had then taken the command chair and had discretely monitored the relief crew's efforts at finding out where they were. The waiting, and their frustrating lack of progress, gnawed at his patience. He reached a point where he could no longer sit on his hands while the less experienced junior officers of the relief crew floundered in their labors and deliberations, making no more headway than the tired crew they had replaced.

"Navigation, have you anything to report to me yet?" asked Kohbrah impatiently.

"No, Sir. We are still unsure of our location."

Well, if nothing else, they have tried, conceded Kohbrah. Their greatest problem is their lack of experience. Perhaps their thinking has been a little too narrow-minded. Perhaps they have been relying too heavily on their training, trying to find answers within the standard set of possibilities. Perhaps it is time for a less exclusive examination of the problem.

"Would one of you explain to me what you have been attempting to use for a navigational reference," he said after several moments of thought.

"Yes, Sir," ventured one of the officers, "we

attempted to tie in to the Imperial Subspace Navigation beacons."

"An excellent starting point," said Kohbrah. "Which beacon configuration did you encounter?"

"Unfortunately, none, Sir. We have been unable to detect any I-S-N beacons."

"No beacons," mused Kohbrah. "Something of a setback, to be sure, but interesting. What did you decide to do after discovering this?"

"We attempted to locate a known celestial phenomenon, Sir, the Gemini Nebulae."

Kohbrah nodded his head in approval. The Gemini Nebulae were another good choice. They were the cloud residues of two stars which had gone nova at practically the same time. Their existence had been known to Romulan skywatchers for centuries. When the proper equipment had become available to Romulan scientists, it had been discovered that the two nebulae exhibited an almost perfect three-to-one ratio of ionized iron content between them. Knowledge of this had enabled the early Romulan stellar navigators to use the Gemini Nebulae as a navigation standard. Although electronic navigation had long since superseded stellar navigation, the older

system's principles were still taught to everyone in the fleet.

"Have you located the Gemini Nebulae?" asked Kohbrah.

"No, Sir. We are still searching for them."

"May I ask where you have searched for them?"

"Everywhere, Sir."

Kohbrah squinted at the forward viewscreen. "You have searched out there?" he asked, pointing at the display.

"Yes, Sir!"

Looking upward, Kohbrah asked, "Have you searched above the ship?"

"Yes, Sir."

"And behind the ship?"

"Of course, Sir."

Kohbrah looked down between his knees at the deck and asked, "Below the ship?"

"Affirmative, Sir. We have covered each and every

sector around the ship."

"I see," said Kohbrah, "and after all this diligent searching, you still have not located the Gemini Nebulae?"

"As I stated before, Sir, we have not."

"So we have not found the Gemini Nebulae, and have not found the I-S-N beacons," pondered Kohbrah. "If we were to disregard these two factors, where would our computers tell us we are?"

"Sir," said the officer who seemed to have become the replacement crew's spokesman, "without identifiable reference points, any derived results would still not be precise enough for warp travel."

"Perhaps not," said Kohbrah patiently, "but just because I am curious, let's see what the computers would say."

The acting navigation officer reconfigured his computer's search matrix to incorporate Kohbrah's hypothetical suggestions. After several minutes of activity the computer displayed its findings at the navigation console.

"Would you care to share the conclusions of your research with the rest of us?" asked Kohbrah.

"They are somewhat disappointing, Sir. Slightly less than an eighty-five percent probability that we are within Federation space. If you accept these findings, we could be within several hours impulse travel time of their Starfleet Headquarters on Earth."

Kohbrah weighed this development for a moment and then asked, "Communications Officer, are we picking up anything on any known Federation communication bands?"

"I am receiving nothing, Sir. In fact, all the known Federation communication bands, including those no longer in use, are without activity."

"Then it is time to review the facts we have gathered," stated Kohbrah. "We have a high, though not conclusive probability that we are in Federation space. If the computer is correct, we should be able to detect the Gemini Nebulae here, and we cannot. No matter where we are, we should be able to detect our subspace I-S-N beacons, and we cannot. Also, we should be able to detect some sign of subspace Federation communications, and we cannot. Does anybody care to speculate?"

The officers quietly talked among themselves and then admitted that they were unable to see anything worthy of speculation.

"Consider the lack of Federation communications activity," Kohbrah suggested. "Next, think about the absence of the Gemini Nebulae, and our own Romulan subspace signals. Has this ship been moved farther in space than centuries-old light from the Gemini Nebulae and two centuries of Romulan subspace signals could have traveled? I don't believe so. Remember, our computer tries to place us near the heart of the Federation."

"But if we are in the heart of the Federation, Sir, where are their communications?"

Kohbrah smiled. "Any communication or broadcast signals, regardless of their source, could only be detected at the time of their origin or after they were emitted."

"Sir, are you suggesting that we might have been displaced into a time period before the generation of these signals?"

Kohbrah continued to smile. "The Gemini Nebulae should be detectable in the present, in the future, at least for a while, or in the near past. If they were to burn out in the near future, we should still be able to detect communications activity."

"Sir, your reasoning rules out all time segments

close to our present. If we accept your presence of communications in the future argument, then you would have us believe that we are now located near Earth at some time in its past."

"It is the only hypothesis which makes sense," stated Kohbrah as he leaned forward in the command chair. "However, it is still only a hypothesis, and requires further investigation."

The junior officers became sidetracked into a number of speculative conversations among themselves. "Imagine, our first encounter with ancestors of our sworn enemies."

"Imagine also what we could do to change the course of their history."

"Why, we could set their civilizations back hundreds, even thousands of years!"

"But if we could successfully deal with the human problem before it become a threat to the Empire, the Ambassador would take credit for everything," lamented an officer who had remained quiet during the others' enthusiastic conjectures.

Kohbrah smiled down from the command chair upon the junior officers before him. He put a finger to

his lips and whispered, "Perhaps we will put off discussing with her what we have discovered."

A new round of subdued enthusiasm rippled through the group of junior officers. The Commander seemed to be on their side. Perhaps he was waiting for the appropriate time to put the annoying Ambassador Ksariss in her place.

From the midst of this pocket of quiet elation one of the junior officers happened to glance toward the entrance to the bridge. What he saw washed the smile from his face. Others, noting his sudden dismay, followed the direction of his gaze, and when they understood the change in his mood they collectively wished they could disappear rather than face what they feared would surely come from the figure in the entrance. All this Kohbrah saw and he guessed what must have happened. He did not bother turning the command chair around to face the entrance to the bridge.

"I am sure that each officer here understands that it is not in anybody's best interest to keep secrets from the Commanding Officer," said Ksariss calmly while leaning on the bulkhead which framed the entrance to the bridge. In her left hand a menacing throwing dagger was perched lightly between her index finger and thumb. "Fortunately for you, Kohbrah, you

continue to be useful to me. Were it not for that redeeming fact, I would have launched my little friend here into the back of your neck. For your future reference, I have never believed in dealing lightly with mutineers. Now, let's have no more conspiring and talking of secrets. You seem to have developed a very interesting theory to work from. If that star system on the screen is the Terran system, why don't we go in there and nose around a little. See what we can discover. I'll be back shortly to see what you have learned."

Ksariss pivoted through the doorway and walked confidently back toward her cabin. After overhearing the latest developments on the bridge, she remembered having uncovered an instructional tape on ancient Earth history among Kohbrah's personal belongings. It might be worthwhile to examine its contents.

* * *

Kirk sat alone at the table in the briefing room, lost in his thoughts and massaging a throbbing forehead. His current mood was far from optimistic, and each

time he attempted to attack the questions and concerns he felt pressed to deal with, he became more and more discouraged. No matter how he tried to look at the ship's present predicament, everything seemed to add up to the fact that he had simply lost control of everything. He considered what he might have done differently. Was there anything he had overlooked which might have prevented the cascade of setbacks from happening? If there was, it was beyond his ability to see it. He was adrift in a stormy sea of questions; a victim of what Spock would say was insufficient data. Hours of unproductive wrestling with the obviously unanswerable was undoubtedly what had made his headache return.

Another question drifted into focus. What force or reason was responsible for everything going wrong? Finding no joy in a question he could at last answer, Kirk quietly acknowledged the response that formed in his mind. Trelane, he believed, was the driving impetus behind the present predicament, and at the moment the entity he knew as a precocious, omnipotent brat was nowhere to be found.

As a precaution, Kirk had earlier authorized Spock to conduct another careful search of the ship for either the undiscovered intruder or the cause of the alarm having been triggered. The crew's best efforts had

failed to provide him with a satisfactory resolution of the matter. Then, bowing to more pressing matters, Kirk had relieved Spock of investigating the extra crewman problem, and had reassigned him to determining the coordinates of their present location. Later, tired of trying to ignore the increasing, pounding pain, and distressed about how it kept him from making headway, Kirk opened a channel to the bridge.

"Yes, Captain?" answered the voice of Spock.

"Have you made any progress, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

"None, Captain. And you?"

"Same here. Is there anything which indicates that the ship is in any immediate danger?"

"No, Captain. None of the readings suggest a cause for alarm."

"Very well, Spock. I'd like you to take care of my ship for a little while. You can start by downgrading the ship's alert status from red to yellow. If I am needed for anything, you'll find me in sick bay."

"Acknowledged, Captain."

Kirk left the briefing room. As he walked toward the turbolift he tried to anticipate the effect his mission reports would have on his chances for a promotion to the Admiralty, if he really was being seriously considered. Before taking the Romulan spy on board he was sure the Admiralty would have had little to criticize about his performance. But now, with having lost his prisoner and ending up so lost that Spock was having trouble finding out where they were, he really wasn't so sure. Even for promotion to Starship Captain there was precious little room for mistakes. Becoming an Admiral meant meeting even stricter standards of performance. He hadn't yet decided if he wanted to accept a position in the Admiralty if it was offered to him, but he felt that if for any reason he would not be the person to fill the currently available position at Headquarters, in the long run it would be better for his career if he had declined his superiors' offer rather than having been passed over because his superiors felt he wasn't up to the job.

When he arrived in sick bay, McCoy was not at his desk. He heard the doctor's voice in another room and called, "Bones...?"

"In here, Captain," answered McCoy from the room

closest to his desk.

Kirk stuck his head inside and saw McCoy attending to an injured crewman. McCoy turned to the door, and Kirk apologized, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were that busy."

"Did you need to see me, Captain?" asked McCoy.

"Yes..."

"Is it an emergency?"

"Not exactly an emergency..."

"If it's not an emergency I'll have to ask you to take a number and wait. I have one more injury to look at after this one."

"I understand," said Kirk. "I'll just wait...out here."

Kirk returned to the waiting room, looked at the chairs, and then went into the nearby examination room to recline on one of the examination tables, hoping that by getting off his feet he could lessen some of the pain of his headache. He suddenly became aware that he was incredibly tired. In spite of this, he resolved to remain alert enough to pop up and join McCoy at his desk when he returned from treating his more seriously disabled patients.

When McCoy had finished with his last patient, he returned to his waiting room hoping that Kirk was the last medical problem he needed to treat for a while. Whatever had tossed the ship about had caused enough injuries to keep him busy for several long hours. Before he could rest there was still administrative work to be done, mostly reviewing the changes and updates to medical records and reports of stores used. He was surprised that Kirk had not remained in his waiting room as he had promised. He was about to assume that Kirk might have been called away on some important matter when he heard a slight stirring from the examination room. He quietly looked in and saw Kirk asleep, rolling over to settle himself into a new position on the first examination table. He checked Kirk with several medical scanners and found signs of fatigue and stress, including a stress-induced tightening of his scalp muscles which could explain why he had come to sick bay in the first place. McCoy was certain that Kirk had finally pushed his mind and body to a point where they had simply refused to absorb more neglect until given the rest they needed. McCoy started sorting through a mental list of medications which might help Kirk, but soon dropped the entire idea. In this case, he thought, some good old-fashioned sleep would fix what was wrong

with the Captain much better than any medications he could offer.

McCoy returned to his desk and opened a channel to the bridge. A moment later Spock responded to his summons, "Yes, Doctor?"

"How is everybody doing on the bridge, Mr. Spock?" McCoy cheerfully asked.

"There appear to be no problems," Spock reported. Then he stopped and thought a moment, and after raising an eyebrow he commented, "It is out of character for you to gather such information in this manner, Doctor. Why did you really call me?"

"I wanted to report that the Captain is visiting down here," said McCoy. He added quietly, "He is currently exhibiting symptoms of stress and fatigue. I am currently monitoring a spontaneous resultant physiological recuperative process which I believe is the best treatment under the circumstances."

"Understood, Doctor," said Spock as he continued with his work. "Would the Captain be available if he is needed?"

"I suppose that if conditions warranted it I could interrupt the process," McCoy replied.

"Very well, Doctor," said Spock. "I wish you success with your chosen course of treatment. In the meantime I shall work toward completing my assigned task."

After signing off, McCoy buried himself in his remaining administrative work. Not long after finishing with it he nodded off to sleep himself, slouched in the chair behind his desk. Sometime later a half-awake James Kirk poked his tousled head back into McCoy's office and saw McCoy asleep behind his desk. Kirk shuffled to the replicator and ordered two steaming cups of coffee. He kept one for himself, and placed the other in front of McCoy on his desk. McCoy's eyes fluttered open the second time Kirk spoke his name.

As McCoy straightened himself in his chair he noticed the cup of coffee. As he reached for it Kirk took a sip of his own and smiled, "If I decide to press charges, your sleeping on duty could be a court martial offense, Doctor."

"If I hadn't previously advised you to get some sleep yourself, Captain, I'd throw that right back at you," dourly responded McCoy.

"Did you know I was asleep in there?" asked Kirk.

"I did."

"How long was I out?"

"Two, maybe three hours."

"I should be angry with you for allowing me to take a nap while I have the ship on alert," Kirk mentioned with a subtle hint of seriousness in his voice.

"Why did you come to see me in the first place?" asked McCoy ignoring the implications of what Kirk had just said.

"That headache came back, with a vengeance," explained Kirk. "I thought you might have been able to prescribe something else for it."

"Do you have the headache now?" asked McCoy.

"No. Come to think of it, I feel much better now."

"That's because your doctor figured that a little cat nap would do you more good than mixing more analgesic chemicals in with your problems."

Kirk instinctively tightened at McCoy's mention of his 'problems'.

"I did consider some medicinal options, Jim," McCoy continued, "but coupled with what I had administered

to you previously, most of them would have temporarily turned your brain to mush, and that's a condition you wouldn't want to be in if there were important decisions to be made. Actually, you did the best thing you could have done to deal with your problem. You left the ship in good hands and came to see your doctor for treatment, and at the end of that treatment, by your own admission, you find yourself fit enough to return to duty."

"Is that what your report will say?" asked Kirk.

"What report?" asked McCoy innocently. "You came down here to check on the crew's injuries, didn't you?"

"I suppose I did," said Kirk, grateful for McCoy's discretion. "How are my injured crewmembers?"

"All on the road to recovery," said McCoy. "In fact, I'm worrying less about them than I am about that scruffy Captain Voxul from the Prinche Gayul. There's some subtle difference in his makeup that keeps him from responding to our medications as fast as I'm used to. Don't get me wrong, he's improving, but he's doing it slowly. All I can do now is monitor him 'round the clock and wait."

Kirk's eyes had narrowed. "Keep him alive, Bones.

I'll need what he knows for Starfleet's investigation of my prisoner's liberation."

"You've had things go wrong before, Jim. Why are you so sensitive about this incident?"

Kirk remained silent. McCoy was poking into things he wasn't exactly ready to discuss, not even with a friend.

"If I know my Starship Captains, this all comes back to that rumored promotion doesn't it?" McCoy prodded.

Kirk was close to telling McCoy to mind his own business. If he was a friend he would let the matter rest. I'm perfectly capable of dealing with my career options on my own, Kirk thought to himself.

"You look like you're about ready to tell me off," McCoy said with a smile.

Kirk swallowed hard. He was on the edge of an emotional explosion that he didn't want to have ignited.

"I already know what you're thinking, Jim," McCoy continued. "You're thinking that you're the Captain, and that you're solely responsible for everything that happens on your ship. You've already heaped all the

blame for this situation on yourself, and you're expecting Starfleet to do the same thing, and rub it in a little for good measure. Maybe they'll say 'Jim Kirk isn't fit for another promotion. Just look at how he screwed up the simplest assignment we gave him in years.'"

Kirk leaped to his feet and smashed his fist onto McCoy's desk. "Why does that amuse you so, Doctor?" he demanded.

"It doesn't amuse me," replied McCoy calmly. "It makes me sad. Captain, as your ship's Chief Medical Officer I am going to ask you an official question, and in that same capacity I am going to demand a truthful answer. This possibility of a promotion, this possibility of displacing you from the freedom of a starship to the confinement of an earthbound desk; it's a threat to something you value a great deal, isn't it?"

Kirk sat down again, studying McCoy intently. His eyes left McCoy's, and he blurted out, "I don't know, Bones."

"I can't accept that," McCoy said. "Why can't you give me a yes or no answer? Do you really want a promotion?"

"Yes, I think I do," Kirk admitted, "but I'm not sure of when I want it."

"That sounds to me like a man who's concerned with keeping his options open," observed McCoy.

"I'll admit to that," said Kirk quietly.

"Then tell me what you think threatens your options."

"Just look at how this mission has turned out," said Kirk.

"I see," said McCoy. "At least, I see enough to know that I've been right. You think that this less than textbook perfect mission will shut down your chances for a promotion now and forever. And maybe you're afraid that refusing an offered promotion now would keep you from consideration when you'd be ready to accept one later, assuming of course that you're not ready now."

Kirk started to smile.

"Let me tell you what I think," McCoy offered. "I think that Starfleet will look closely at this entire mission. I think they'll admit that any Starship Captain could have made the same command choices you made up to this point. In fact, if memory serves,

they've already said they don't blame you for the loss of the prisoner. You've bumped into something that is challenging your ability to deal with it. How you meet that challenge will determine whether or not you're fit enough for a higher office. Personally, I believe you are, or you will be when you're ready for it. There's no great rush to get to the top. Make sure you're really ready before you say 'yes' to the chair when it's pulled out for you."

The prolonged, silent eye contact between Kirk and McCoy delighted McCoy, though he tried not to show it. It meant that Kirk was at last thinking about things that had needed to be said for quite a while.

"Thanks, Bones. It has helped to talk about this with someone," Kirk finally admitted.

"Two things before you go," said McCoy. "First, you're still under doctor's orders to get more rest. A setback is always worse when you're tired. And second, lighten up on yourself a little. You've got the best crew in the whole of Starfleet to back you up. Follow my advice once, and you may live long enough to retire."

Kirk stood up. "Thanks again, Doctor. I should be getting back to the bridge. If I - excuse me - if 'we' don't soon find out where we are, Starfleet will have a

devil of a time figuring out where to send my pension payments."

Kirk left sick bay and had walked well down the corridor before McCoy's intercom announced, "Spock to Dr. McCoy. Is Captain Kirk still within your facility?"

"Not any more, Mr. Spock. Our much recovered Captain Kirk is on his way to the bridge."

Minutes later Kirk walked onto the bridge and went to the command chair. He surveyed the busy personnel at the various stations on the bridge and admitted that McCoy had been right. His was the best crew in all of Starfleet.

Spock had been making final checks on a collection of data he had assembled during Kirk's absence from the bridge. He instructed his station computer to save his information onto a tape, and then turned to Kirk, observing, "I see that Dr. McCoy has wrought another of his medical miracles."

"Indeed he has," Kirk grinned, "in his own strange and mysterious way. Have you discovered anything that will help us yet?"

"Possibly," Spock said cautiously. "Accumulated

data from our sensors and several observations from our bridge personnel have brought to light a, shall we say, interesting theory."

"Sounds intriguing," said Kirk. "Let's hear what you've put together."

"First of all, Captain, Lt. Uhura has reported that all communications channels are completely devoid of activity."

"We must have been thrown pretty far not to pick up any communications signals," Kirk observed.

"That possibility was considered," Spock explained. "Using the assumption that we had been displaced over a great distance necessitated the preparation of a logical sequence of search parameters for the computers. I was working on this when Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov started pointing out star patterns that they believed were similar to familiar constellations seen from Earth. When the computers were fed this information, they suggested that we might be located just outside Earth's own solar system. The reason our computers derived a mere suggestion instead of a conclusion from that data is because the indicated star patterns are not an exact match for what we should see from this sector of the galaxy. Please observe the viewscreen as I magnify the outlined section in the

upper right quadrant. The star now in the center of the screen is given a high probability of being Polaris, Earth's north polar star. Notice what happens when I project Polaris' anticipated position from these coordinates onto the screen."

Kirk saw two distinct points of light on the viewscreen. "If that is Polaris, why isn't it where the computer expects it to be?" he asked.

"The answer to that question eluded me until I began to factor in the phenomenon of stellar drift - the slow movement of stars to different positions over long periods of time, along with the possibilities of our hypothetical northern or southern placements with references to the host star's orbital plane" said Spock. "I am instructing the computer to project the anticipated location in our century of each identified star on the viewscreen."

Spock's action made the viewscreen display look like an old photograph taken by an unsteady camera. Each star on the screen was now complemented with a duplicate which was in some cases projected close enough to other stars to form the illusion of streaks instead of crisp points of light.

Spock continued to enter instructions into his computer. "Watch the screen carefully, Captain, as I

change the stardate of the projected stars to reflect a regression through time."

The numerical representation of the projected stars' stardate, shown in the lower right corner of the viewscreen, began to change rapidly, reflecting the display's retrogression through time. As the display raced into the past the projected stars converged onto the coordinates of the actual stars on the viewscreen. Finally, when there was no discernable difference between the viewscreen's star display and Spock's projection, he halted the simulation.

"Please notice, Captain," Spock said, "that the displayed stardate corresponds to a time approximately three thousand years in the past. For each star's anticipated location to correspond to its currently observed location, as it does now on the viewscreen, this ship would have had to travel approximately three thousand years into the past."

"Are you absolutely certain of this?" Kirk asked. It wasn't the most logical question to put to one's Vulcan Science Officer, who wouldn't have even mentioned the possibility if there wasn't a chance it could be true. It was just that Spock's revelations had caught him off guard. The Enterprise had survived two previous time jumps, each one covering a journey of several hundred years, but each time it had taken every ounce

of power the ship could generate to make it possible. He couldn't imagine how any known technology could produce the power required to propel anything three thousand years through time.

"The acquisition of additional data is essential to the verification of this hypothesis," stated Spock. "However, the complete absence of electromagnetic or subspace communications makes the possibility of a time displacement into the past the more likely explanation."

Kirk thought for a moment. "Alright, Mr. Spock, if it's more data you need, then more data you shall have. Helm, take us into this star system at one-quarter impulse power. Sensors to maximum. Let's see what we pick up."

---- CHAPTER EIGHT ----

Ambassador Ksariss walked slowly onto the bridge of the Talon. The members of the bridge crew were so absorbed in their accumulating and analyzing data that nobody noticed and announced her arrival. She considered criticizing that insulting breach of

protocol, but the fact that everybody was so hard at work and so productively getting somewhere made her feel somewhat more forgiving. She approached the command chair and stood beside it where she again remained unnoticed as Kohbrah leaned forward to look over the shoulders of crewmen absorbed in discussing new data readouts in front of him.

Ksariss cleared her throat, breaking Kohbrah's concentration. "If you could make your posterior unstick itself from my command chair, you would find it much easier to be a part of the junior officers' deliberations, Commander," she loudly observed.

Ksariss' humiliating comment had been heard all around the bridge. Kohbrah turned and shot Ksariss an angry look, but he held his tongue. He slowly arose and gestured grandly for her to take the seat.

Ksariss' eyebrows narrowed, and her incensed eyes burned into those of Kohbrah. In a scorching, intense tone she said to Kohbrah, "Let's set one important matter straight, Commander. I hold the rank of Ambassador At Large, a deserved and unique honor bestowed upon me and witnessed by every member of the Romulan Senate. I do so greatly outrank you, soldier boy! If you trifle with me, if you push me to the limits of my tolerance, you can rest assured that your piddling career will at that moment have

effectively ended!"

With everyone's eyes upon her she smartly claimed the command chair. The silence on the bridge reassured her that she still held the crew in a tight rein. With calm confidence she addressed Kohbrah. "Thank you for looking after my chair, Commander. I see that your men have been busy. Please prepare for me a report of their progress."

Kohbrah took an uncomfortably long time to absorb Ksariss' latest challenges to his dignity. Then, without any show of emotion, he went to circulate among the junior officers, talking, discussing, and collecting the information they had to offer. All this time he was aware that Ksariss was slyly watching him over the top of a handful of handwritten notes she had brought along to the bridge to study. Her face revealed nothing of what she might be thinking. When he had interviewed each of the officers at the forward stations he returned to make his report to Ksariss.

"Yes, Commander?" she inquired without looking up from her notes.

"I have a summary of the crew's investigations, as you requested," said Kohbrah.

"I did not 'request', Commander, I 'ordered'," said Ksariss pleasantly. "Think for a moment about the difference, and then you may continue."

There was a momentary flicker of anger on Kohbrah's face which Ksariss did not see. As he swallowed he looked as though he was trying to force an unchewed hand disruptor down his throat.

"We are still not completely certain that we are in the Federation's Terran system," said Kohbrah a moment later, "but the information we are collecting seems to be pressing us closer to that conclusion. We have detected eight major planetary bodies in the system. The collected information for the four outer planets corresponds to our best data on the Terran system, but it is proving difficult to explain why there are major deviations from the orbital readings we would expect to be collecting from three of the four inner planets."

Ksariss put down the papers that had held her attention. "What do you mean by 'major deviations', Commander?" she asked.

"There are no deviations for the first and innermost planet, Ambassador. However, if this is the Terran system, the second planet should be in a nearly perfect circular orbit. Our calculations show that its

orbit is extremely eccentric. This orbital irregularity becomes a minor discovery when compared to our calculated orbits for the third and fourth planets."

Kohbrah stopped at this point to mentally review the information he was presenting. Before he stated the conclusion to which the data pointed he felt a need to reexamine it for a flaw or misinterpretation. Ksariss waited patiently for Kohbrah to continue. At last, finding no glaring errors, he finished his report.

"The last and most interesting deviation is that within several weeks the third planet will be struck and destroyed by the system's fourth planet, which for some reason seems to have completely abandoned the orbit it should be occupying."

"If this is the Terran system, the third planet would be Earth, would it not?" asked Ksariss thoughtfully.

"That is true," responded Kohbrah.

"And you are certain of the impending impact between planets four and three?" asked Ksariss.

"Yes, we are."

"If proven valid, this could be an opportunity of value beyond description!" exclaimed an excited Ksariss. "To witness, and to document the destruction

of humankind and their world before they even learn how to lift themselves off the surface of their planet! To even be associated with such a report might even save your imperiled career, Commander!"

"These honors may never be awarded, Ambassador," interrupted Kohbrah, who had again become annoyed with Ksariss' seemingly inexhaustible capacity for flinging barbs in his direction. "There is still uncertainty that this system is the home of the humans. We have also not positively identified the time period in which the predicted events will take place."

"Then how do we eliminate this uncertainty," challenged Ksariss.

"Perhaps a closer look at the doomed third planet would be in order," suggested Kohbrah.

Ksariss carefully considered Kohbrah's proposal, looking carefully beneath its attractive exterior glitter for any devious ways it could be used to discredit her. When she had at last convinced herself that Kohbrah's suggestion held no ulterior purpose, she said, "We shall act on your proposal, Commander. See to it that a thorough planetary survey is carried out. It would be prudent to engage our cloaking device until we are certain of our status. I shall be in my quarters

preparing to analyze the collected data."

As she left the bridge Kohbrah glared after her. How easy it would be to engineer an accident, he thought, if only the ship had been designed with an airlock in his former quarters.

* * *

The Enterprise had moved carefully into the star system which Spock believed was the home of the planet Earth. He worked tirelessly for hours as data streamed into his station. Solar, planetary, and lunar masses, sizes and compositions, gravitational and magnetic field measurements, calculated orbits, and much, much more had been documented.

Kirk's patience became stretched to its limit. When he could contain his curiosity no longer he casually walked toward the science station and watched Spock directing various sequences of data to appropriate groupings. "Any preliminary conclusions, Mr. Spock," he asked.

"At this time I have no conclusions, Captain," Spock said while monitoring an incoming data sequence,

"although some of the available data strongly supports the theory that we are in the Terran system."

Two short beeps sounded from the chronometer at the science station. Spock placed the computers into an automatic data filing mode and wrote an entry into his station log. "It is time to relieve the bridge crew, Captain," he explained to Kirk. "With your permission..."

"Of course, Mr. Spock. Permission granted."

In a moment the turbolift door opened and the first arrivals of the relief crew headed toward their stations. Kirk watched Chekov and Sulu leave while they intently discussed things that had occurred on their shift. When he turned his attention back to Spock he was surprised to see his first officer studying the two crewmen who had replaced Chekov and Sulu.

Kirk discretely asked "Is something wrong, Spock?"

Quietly Spock asked, "Do you remember an earlier conversation where I related how I had checked the personnel files of all our assigned crew members?"

Spock's eyes never left the pair of crewmen at the helm and navigation consoles as Kirk responded, "Does this have something to do with your extra

crewman?"

"Possibly," Spock speculated. After several seconds of thought he added, "I remember scanning the record of the navigator, Ensign Samuel Kramer, but it is the helmsman who disturbs me. His face was not in the records I checked before our departure from KetrIDGE Alpha."

As he finished speaking, Spock accessed the computer's personnel files. He quickly narrowed his search to crewmen qualified as starship helmsmen, and then isolated the file of the man currently piloting the Enterprise.

"Have you ever seen him before..." Kirk asked, "anywhere on the ship?"

"I have never seen this crewman before, Jim. Nor have I ever examined this particular personnel file."

Kirk had detected a subtle change in the timbre of Spock's voice which left him with the impression that it was important to Spock he be believed in this matter.

"I have a suggestion, Mr. Spock," Kirk said aloud. "Why don't you run a few quick checks on this undocumented file and make sure it's harmless. If you

can't figure out what it is, quarantine it from the rest of the system memory. We can always straighten it out at a better time."

"Understood, Captain," replied Spock. "Thank you for your assistance."

Once again Spock set to work at his station while Kirk returned to his command chair. He was creating a loose mental outline of a get-acquainted conversation he planned to have with Kramer and the other new man. He was hoping to let a short period of time pass before approaching them so that his interview would not seem to be connected with his last conversation with Spock. He busied himself for a while with administrative chores, and then got up to stretch his legs. He strolled casually around the front of the forward consoles, occasionally watching everyone working on the bridge. At last, he innocently dropped his gaze to the forward consoles and looked as though he had remembered something he had recently forgotten.

"Excuse me," he said. "You crewmen just recently transferred aboard, didn't you?" Then he looked at the navigator, saying, "I think I remember seeing you busy with the library computers. Ensign... Samuel Kramer. Historical files, mostly. Am I correct?"

Ensign Kramer stood and offered Kirk his hand. "Correct, Sir," he smiled. "Earth's ancient history is a lifelong passion of mine."

"Sounds interesting," said Kirk. "I have a few favorite historical periods of my own. We'll have to compare notes sometime."

"I'd like that, Sir," responded Kramer.

Kirk turned to the helmsman. "I'm afraid I owe you an apology, Ensign. I usually make a point of reviewing the records of my new transferees, but the way things have been piling up around here I've either forgotten everything I might have read about you, or I simply haven't gotten to it yet."

"That's quite understandable, Captain," said the second new crewman affably as he stood and offered his hand. "My name is Sabat. Gari Sabat. My assignment here was kind of rushed, so it's possible my records are still on the bottom of a pile of more important things."

Sabat wore a mustache and well-trimmed beard that did an outstanding job of masking something hauntingly familiar which Kirk sensed as he looked into the man's eyes. "It's regrettable if they are," Kirk apologized. "There are few things more important

than a Captain getting to know his crew. I'll make a special effort to read them thoroughly as soon as I can. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Captain," Sabat smiled as he sat down and returned to his duties.

At the science station, Spock turned his chair around and faced Kirk. "Captain, the collected data on the inner planets is ready for your review. There are findings which should be of interest to you."

Kirk went to examine Spock's newest information. He was unable to focus his eyes on the tiny display within the protective hood at the science station. "I think this will work better if you just project it on the forward viewscreen," he said to Spock.

Spock projected a map of the star system they were exploring onto the screen. It was drawn to scale, and showed the location and distance of each of the planets from the host star. Kirk soon noticed that several items of displayed data for the inner planets could not possibly be correct if he was looking at a map of the Terran system.

"Could you redraw the display to focus on the four inner planets, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked.

Spock complied, and the viewscreen showed an inner planet display that soon commanded everyone's attention. The projected orbit of the second planet, which should have been nearly perfectly circular, was noticeably out-of-round, and it passed uncomfortably close to the orbits of its neighbors. The projected orbits of the third and fourth planets foretold an inevitable collision.

Even though the viewscreen display was clearly visible from anywhere on the bridge, Ensign Kramer got up from his chair and walked around the front of his console for a closer look. Upon seeing this, Kirk left the science station and stood behind the command chair, waiting for Kramer to do or say something which would explain his behavior. Kramer turned around and searched for Kirk.

"I don't believe this!" he exclaimed. "It's Velikovsky. Immanuel Velikovsky! Don't you see?"

Kirk could not fathom the significance of the name, so he turned questioningly to Spock.

"Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky," said Spock after a moment's reflection, "published a series of works on Earth in the 1950's which were, in their day, considered a radical interpretation of events preserved in ancient Earth historical and religious

accounts. His theories made fascinating reading, but they conflicted strongly with widely accepted beliefs in many sciences and religions. A strong coalition of conservative minds expended a great effort in discrediting Dr. Velikovsky's theories, and kept them from serious scientific examination. If you will recall Trelane's earlier visit, he mentioned the death of Dr. Albert Einstein. Some proponents of Dr. Velikovsky's theories were fond of mistakenly relating how Albert Einstein died with an open volume of Dr. Velikovsky's *WORLDS IN COLLISION* on his desk. You will remember that Trelane also alluded to this occurrence."

"How does all that apply to our problem?" Kirk asked.

Spock studied the viewscreen before saying, "It is possible that the displayed planetary array on the viewscreen could be interpreted as loosely applying to one of the scenarios in Dr. Velikovsky's writings."

"I'm starting to remember a little about this Dr. Velikovsky," said Kirk contemplatively. "A lot of people thought his ideas should have been ignored."

"I would not dismiss Ensign Kramer's observation lightly, Captain," warned Spock. "Remember, the scientific data collected for this system is accurate.

The fourth and third planets will collide, whether they are Mars and Earth, or not. We have not conclusively disproved the possibility..."

"So you believe this is worth further investigation?" proposed Kirk. He had interrupted Spock because the implication that his home planet might be destroyed long before he was ever born was a tangle of logic he was trying to avoid until he was absolutely forced to deal with it.

"More time is needed to assemble relevant material, Captain," replied Spock. "If Trelane's devices have now enabled him to study Earth's twentieth century, then it is possible that he has become aware of the writings of Dr. Velikovsky through their association with Dr. Einstein. Recall also that we have previously witnessed the capabilities of Trelane's previous devices; for instance, the ability to move a planet through space at will. Logically, we are forced to consider the possibility that he could have created the planetary array we have discovered in this system."

"How could we collect the additional information you need?" asked Kirk.

A loud, grating alarm interrupted their discussion.

"Brace yourselves for attack!" shouted Ensign Sabat as he stabbed at the controls on his console.

Before Kirk fully understood what had happened, Sabat had raised the shields and had plunged the Enterprise into a radical evasive maneuver which taxed the gravity compensators' abilities to negate the powerful resulting inertial effects. People and unsecured objects were buffeted and thrown about. On the viewscreen a spread of photon torpedoes sizzled by, seemingly close enough to have left lines of char on the outer hull. A late-arriving torpedo from the spread impacted the side shields in a glancing blow. The ship shuddered as the torpedo's blinding explosive energy was dissipated.

Sabat's expert handling of the ship was placing it in a position to attempt returning fire at whatever had attacked them. Spock had managed to crawl back to his station and switch his sensors on line.

"Our assailant is the Romulan warship, Talon, Captain," he reported.

How - Kirk wondered. Three thousand years in the past, and still being harassed by Romulan lunatics?

"Phasers armed and locked on, Sir," reported Sabat.

It would have been better if you had given me photon torpedoes, Kirk thought before realizing that loading torpedoes into the launch tubes would have been impossible during the maneuver Sabat had just put the ship through.

"Range!" demanded Kirk.

"Near the effective limit, Sir," responded Sabat.

If the Enterprise is going to respond, it has to be before the Romulan ship is out of range or hidden by its cloaking device, thought Kirk. "Fire phasers, Ensign!" he ordered.

Sabat's shots were accurate. The bolts of phaser energy raced toward the Talon, striking and illuminating its rear shields. Kirk's excitement ebbed rapidly as he remembered the range at which the shots had been attempted.

Spock peered into his hooded display at the science station. "Direct hits, Captain, though only minimal damage," he reported.

The door of the turbolift opened, and the only living creature in it, a wide-eyed, terrified black cat, leaped onto the bridge. Hugging the floor it streaked toward the forward consoles and leaped onto the lap of

Ensign Sabat setting its front claws firmly into his uniform shirt. He winced, and with one hand tried to calm the cat, while with the other, pilot the ship.

"You should not have come here," he said soothingly to the cat as it howled and looked into his eyes. "Yes, I understand. You were frightened. Yes, everything is alright now. No. Alright, you may remain with me for a while, but you must be quiet and not get in the way. I still have work to do."

A busy moment later Sabat reported, "Sir, I have laid in an intercept course."

"Captain, the Romulans appear to be engaging their cloaking device," added Spock.

"Thank you, gentlemen," acknowledged Kirk, shifting his eyes from the black cat and its collar decorated with large, sparkling white gemstones, to the forward viewscreen. "Prepare a full spread of photon torpedoes and let's find where that Romulan ship has gone."

Before Kirk's order could be carried out there was a blinding flash of light on the bridge. As his vision recovered, Kirk saw Trelane standing before the main viewscreen attired in a shining metal breastplate and a knee-length leather kilt. On one outstretched arm

he carried a shield, and in the hand of the other, a long spear. A heavy iron sword hung on his hip, suspended from a leather belt around his waist.

"Belay that last order," he shouted gleefully as he pointed clumsily with his spear toward Sabat's station. "You'll only be wasting your pitiful stock of fireworks."

Trelane then scanned the entire bridge and beamed a great smile. "Wonderful! You're all here!" he exclaimed. "Come, Captain Kirk. Come, Commander Spock. It's time for the next level of the game!"

Again there was a great flash of light, and when it had dissipated, the only noticeable change was that Trelane, Captain Kirk, and Commander Spock were no longer present on the bridge of the Enterprise.

* * *

Commander Kohbrah had ordered the cloaked Romulan warship Talon onto a heading which would eventually take it into a high orbit around the blue and wispy-white third planet. The Talon's sensors were detecting nothing to indicate the planet was inhabited

by a technologically advanced race. More strongly than ever Kohbrah believed that his ship had somehow come to exist at an unspecified time in the past: a time when ancestors of the known advanced civilized races in the galaxy were making their first efforts at communal living, or establishing their great ancient empires, or beginning to understand the benefits of logic and science over superstition and fear. Whether he still existed in his own present, or had reemerged in the past, Kohbrah still technically commanded a ship capable of travel between the stars. That much had not changed. What had changed was the fact that if his ship actually now did exist in the past, there were no known friendly ports to visit. Not for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. The absence of artificial electromagnetic signals and evidence of grand engineering works from a world that Kohbrah knew had achieved a level of scientific development on par with his own made Kohbrah feel very much alone in the universe.

Suddenly a loud, pulsating alarm at the communications station wrenched him from the hypnotic grip of his gloomy thoughts. The Communications Officer immediately responded, instructing his computer to analyze the triggering sensor readings. Because the alarm could only have been triggered by readings the computer associated

with hostile intent, Kohbrah was anxious for an explanation.

"Why did that alarm sound?" he demanded.

"We have detected something that seems to be a broad-band array of active sensor scans," said the Communications Officer as he keyed additional instructions into the computer at his console. A moment later he added, "The scanning patterns match those of a Federation Constitution-class Starship."

Kohbrah's eyes narrowed, and in a voice tinged with bitterness, he said, "Only one Constitution-class Starship in all of space and time could possibly have come with us to wherever we are, and it is named Enterprise."

"Should I notify the Ambassador, Sir?" asked the communications officer.

Kohbrah quickly held up an open hand to put the suggestion to rest. Dealing with the Enterprise was a strictly military matter, and one he could handle better without the Ambassador's distorted priorities and logic undermining his expertise.

"Has the Federation ship detected us?" inquired Kohbrah.

"No, Sir. We are cloaked and completely hidden from their scans," said the Communications Officer. "Their shields are down. They are showing no detectable signs of caution."

"Excellent," smiled Kohbrah. "Helm, maneuver us to a position slightly above and behind the Federation ship. From there we will confirm its identity and deal with it."

For the better part of an hour the Talon carefully approached the attack position chosen by Kohbrah. Long range scans picked out the vessel's numerical designation from its saucer section - NCC 1701. Kohbrah, quite pleased, simply nodded his head in approval. When the Talon was finally positioned to his liking, Kohbrah instructed, "On my command, disengage the cloaking device. Weapons Officer, when the cloaking field is clear, launch our spread of torpedoes. Minimal dispersion."

After a moment to make certain everything was ready, Kohbrah ordered, "Now! Bring us out of the cloaking field!"

The Weapons Officer was highly skilled, and had been personally recruited by Kohbrah. His sense of timing could only be described as a refined art. His firing of the torpedoes at exactly the moment of the

cloaking field's collapse exactly matched Kohbrah's vision of what should ideally have happened. As the torpedoes drew closer to their target, Kohbrah could feel excitement welling up inside. The unshielded Enterprise appeared to be completely unaware of the danger it was in. When the torpedoes were almost at the point of impact Kohbrah could almost see bright flashes where they would detonate on the unprotected ship.

Suddenly, the Enterprise veered to the left, clawing itself into a turn tighter than Kohbrah had ever believed possible from a vessel of its size. A bright flash appeared along the right side of the saucer section. One of the torpedoes had detonated, but from the angle of its trajectory it was impossible to tell how much damage, if any, had been caused.

"The Enterprise's shields were raised, Sir," reported the weapons officer. "They appear to have absorbed the impact of the single hit."

Kohbrah allowed himself the luxury of a single angry expletive before ordering, "Evasive maneuvers. Get us away from here, fast! Engage the cloaking device!"

On the viewscreen Kohbrah could see that the Enterprise was bringing itself to bear on his ship

much faster than he had expected. The distance between the Talon and the Enterprise had increased, but that fact was bringing little comfort to Kohbrah. At the completion of its turn the Enterprise would be ideally situated for a shot at the Talon's stern. When the Talon's cloaking field was established, it could turn and hide, but until then, distance was its best ally. Kohbrah wasn't sure he would have enough.

The Enterprise fired its phasers.

The Talon's cloaking field was becoming more substantial as power was automatically diverted from the shields to support it. The incoming phaser bolts struck the dying shields and shook the ship. Fortunately, the last vestiges of the shields had retained enough energy to absorb the phaser blast's distance-depleted power.

Kohbrah was attempting to formulate his next strategic moves when Ksariss, who had stormed onto the bridge, leaped in front of the command chair. She firmly grasped both its arms in her hands and leaned into Kohbrah's face, screaming, "What have you done? You were not given authorization to engage in combat! That is my command prerogative alone!"

Angrily Kohbrah extended his left arm and roughly pushed Ksariss to the side and out of his way.

Suddenly the bridge was enveloped in a great flash of light, and a human figure wielding a menacing spear and dressed in battle armor of an ancient, alien design stood before them all. The alien warrior simply announced, "Commander Kohbrah, Ambassador Ksariss, I have need of your services!"

Then Kohbrah, Ksariss, and the warrior vanished within another brilliant enveloping flash of light.

---- CHAPTER NINE ----

With Trelane's abduction of Captain Kirk and Commander Spock, Lt. Uhura became the senior officer on the bridge. She immediately took charge. "Everybody back to your posts," she ordered. "Monitor that Romulan ship closely, Mr. Sabat. If there are any signs of hostile activity, do whatever is necessary to defend the ship."

She next opened a channel to engineering. "Bridge to Lt. Commander Scott. Please report to the bridge immediately."

It was several minutes before the ship's Chief Engineer could respond, and he did so in a thickly

accented voice bristling with agitation. "This is Scott. I'm up to my eyebrows in problems down here, Lieutenant! Our warp engines have gone off line again. It's the same for the weapons systems. Now what in blazes is so important that I have to come to the bridge?"

"Commander, we had another visit from Trelane," Uhura explained. "Captain Kirk and Commander Spock disappeared with him when he left. They are no longer aboard the Enterprise."

That piece of information was met with a string of strong Scottish profanity. "Alright, Lieutenant. I'll need to give out some instructions down here. I'll come to the bridge as soon as I can. What are those Romulans up to?"

Uhura channeled information from the ship's sensor array to her station. "Apparently very little, Sir. They haven't even moved since Trelane showed up. Maybe that has something to do with the inconsistent power readings I'm getting from them."

"Well, maybe our friend Trelane saw fit to even the odds for a bit," Scott speculated. "Keep an eye on them. I'll be on my way soon."

Several minutes later the turbolift door hissed

open. Lt. Commander Scott stepped out and headed for the command chair. "You're just in time, Sir," said Uhura. "We're being hailed by the Romulan ship. Their Executive Officer, Subcommander Tarsus, wants to speak to our Captain."

"Ach!" said Scott in disgust as he spun the command chair around. "Lieutenant, while I find out what this, --- Romulan officer wants to jabber about, I'll need you to prepare copies of all pertinent log entries for the last few hours. I'll need to get a feeling for what's been going on up here."

As Scott slowly turned the command chair back toward the viewscreen he closed his eyes. Within a few seconds he had assumed a facade of calm and control. He then opened his eyes and said to Uhura, "Very well, Lieutenant, put our Romulan friend on screen."

The image of the Romulan officer which appeared on the viewscreen appeared to be quite angry and unsettled. It was leaning far forward in its chair, hostile and aggressive. "I am Subcommander Tarsus, acting Commander of the Romulan warship Talon," the image asserted. It studied the diminishing smile of Lt. Commander Scott for a moment before blurting out, "I do not recognize YOU as Captain of the Enterprise. Quickly, summon him, or you instead shall

be responsible for what I will do to your ship."

"Ah, please, laddie. Calm yourself down a wee bit," admonished Scott. He had, at first, been shocked by Tarsus' crude attempt at establishing superiority, but the more he had thought about Tarsus' opening remarks, the more he had realized that Tarsus was a relatively inexperienced commander doing a less than convincing job of rattling his sabre. "I am Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, and as things happen to stand, I am currently the ranking officer on the bridge. So if there is anything worth saying, you'll be saying it to me."

"I will say this only once more," Tarsus threatened with decidedly more emphasis. "I will speak with your Captain. Immediately!"

"Now there we have a problem, Mister Tarsus," Scott calmly responded, deciding to play with the Romulan officer. "You see, our Captain has gone back to his quarters to water his plants. He is quite meticulous in caring for them. Most likely he would not take well to being distracted by empty demands from a low-ranking Romulan officer. So, in your best interest, if you've anything to say to the Captain, I'll be happy to pass it along when Captain Kirk can join us again."

Clearly Subcommander Tarsus was uncertain of how to react to Lt. Commander Scott's responses. Dumbfounded, his image lingered on the viewscreen for several long seconds before dissolving in a fit of static. Then on the viewscreen the Talon floated motionless against the star-sprinkled blackness of space, while in the near background a blue-green planet hung, hiding its features beneath cottony swirled blankets of white. More distantly a red sphere floated in space, larger than any star, though not yet so prominent as to readily provoke concern.

Somewhat amused by the exchange between Tarsus and Scott, Uhura asked, "What do you suppose that was all about?"

"That Romulan wanted something," said Scott, thinking aloud and stroking a forefinger across his chin. "Something that only Captain Kirk, or the presence of Captain Kirk could give him."

"Sir, he did say that he was their acting commander..." reminded Uhura.

"Aye, he did," Scott remembered, his eyes brightening. "It may be that he has told us more than he's learned from us."

"How do you mean, Sir?" asked Uhura.

"Well, I'd sort of expect a Klingon to bluster and bluff the way Tarsus tried to do, but that sort of conduct is not what you'd see from a rational and experienced Romulan officer. If he's the acting commander, I'll wager something's happened to his superior officer. Maybe Trelane's evening of the odds was a bit more involved than simply disabling systems on both our ships."

"But, you can't be sure of that, Sir," said Uhura.

"Not totally," said Scott, but he added confidently, "but I believe that Tarsus DOES have a problem of some sort, and there are answers he needs from us before he knows what to do about it. As long as he has those doubts and uncertainty, he might just behave himself. Continue close monitoring, and keep me advised of any changes in status."

"Aye, Sir."

Scott opened a channel to Engineering. "This is Lt. Commander Scott on the bridge. Can you give me a report on your progress down there?"

"Lieutenant Eaton here, Sir. Most of our problems are caused by several banks of fused control boards and relays. We expect to have everything replaced soon, tested, and on line."

"Very impressive, Lieutenant. Keep me advised. Scott out."

With the Romulans under close surveillance and repairs well underway, Scott was free to review the log entries he had requested from Lt. Uhura. As he arose and approached her station she held out a computer tape cassette which contained his information.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," acknowledged Scott as he took the cassette. "You have the bridge. This ship is to stay at red alert until I return from the briefing room. I'll review our alert status at that time."

Scott remained secluded for an hour in the briefing room examining the log tapes. During this time he received a welcome interruption from engineers who reported that all damaged systems were again available, giving the Enterprise a decided advantage over the Talon which still appeared to be struggling with its own power problems.

After reviewing the bridge log entries recorded immediately before Trelane's second appearance Scott wished that Spock was still aboard to provide more information about Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky. But since Spock obviously could not provide this information, he decided that he needed to interview

his next best source, Ensign Kramer, who had first mentioned Dr. Velikovsky's name in connection with the main viewscreen's display.

Before arranging the interview, Scott skimmed through Spock's science log entries, finding a list of subjects to be researched in the ship's computer memory banks in hopes of shedding more light on the connection between the viewscreen display and Dr. Velikovsky. Spock had also included a cryptic personal note to himself:

"Investigate SABAT / 7? / Earth 1968."

Something about the entry "Earth 1968" almost awakened a memory, but Scott's overtaxed mind could not readily make the connection. He realized that he needed a First Officer to help him make sense out of all the puzzling and seemingly disorganized pieces he had figuratively lying in a jumble on his table. He pressed a button on the comm panel which opened a channel to the bridge.

"Yes, Mr. Scott?" responded Uhura.

"Lieutenant, would you please locate Mr. Sulu and

have him report to me in the briefing room?"

"Yes, Sir. Mr. Sulu is in his quarters. I'll call him right away."

Several minutes later the door of the briefing room opened and admitted Sulu. Scott looked up from the computer monitor on the table. "Please, come in, Mr. Sulu," he invited. "Sit down. I guess you've heard something of what has happened."

"Yes, Sir. The entire ship is talking about it."

"No doubt," Scott agreed. "Let's review things anyway, just so we have all the facts straight. What I've seen in the log tapes leaves me believing that Trelane has kidnapped Captain Kirk and Commander Spock. I've gotten a strong suspicion that something like that may have also happened to our Romulan friends. It appears that I have inherited command, and right now I desperately need a First Officer and Science Officer. Do you think you're up to the job?"

Pleasantly surprised by Scott's offer, Sulu responded, "When do I start, Sir?"

"Right away," answered Scott. "After you've reviewed the highlights of the log tapes, we've got to learn all there is to know about a certain Dr.

Immanuel Velikovsky. I'll soon be calling Ensign Samuel Kramer in to talk to us. I'm betting that he knows more about the man than he's had a chance to tell us. I'll need you to run checks with the computer on any helpful information we may get from him. And don't be afraid to chime in with any observations or suggestions. You'll notice that Mr. Spock left a list of potentially helpful topics in his science log."

Scott gave Sulu time to bring himself up to date while he recorded Sulu's temporary reassignment, and verified that the Romulan warship was still benignly working on its internal problems. A review of related sensor readings with Lt. Uhura convinced him that he had the time to talk with Ensign Kramer. "Lieutenant, please arrange for someone to temporarily relieve the navigator, Ensign Kramer, and have him report to me in the briefing room."

Several minutes later Ensign Kramer walked into the briefing room. "Come in, Ensign Kramer. Please, sit down. I'm Lt. Commander Scott, temporarily in command, and this is Lt. Sulu, our acting First Officer. I've got some important questions to ask you, so get comfortable. I expect we'll be a while."

Kramer sat across the table from Scott, leaning slightly forward in his chair and resting his arms on the table. Scott called a recorded copy of the

viewscreen display which had inspired the Velikovsky questions onto the computer monitor at the table, and then began his questioning. "Our log tapes show that you mentioned the name Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky while looking at this viewscreen display on the bridge. What I need to know is who this Dr. Velikovsky is, and how he connects to what's displayed on this viewscreen."

"This could turn into a long story, Sir," Kramer began, "but I'll try to stick with the basics. Dr. Velikovsky is my family's only famous ancestral relative. We are descended from a close relative of Elisha Kramer, who married Dr. Velikovsky in the early 1920's. Personally, I think he's a fascinating ancestor. I collect anything I can find relating to his work."

"That explains your interest in the man," said Scott. "I understand that Dr. Velikovsky's work stirred up a fair share of controversy, but before we get into that, I'm curious about his credentials. Tell me what you can about him."

Kramer looked toward the ceiling and spoke as thoughts came to him. "He was born in Russia, shortly before the beginning of the twentieth century. As far as schooling, he studied natural science in Edinburgh, Scotland, and then law and ancient history in Russia.

He also earned a medical diploma after World War One. After that he lived in Berlin, Germany, where he met and married Elisha Kramer. Shortly after that, they traveled to Palestine where he practiced medicine, and then he returned to Europe where he was trained in psychiatry."

"Shortly before World War Two, Dr. Velikovsky traveled to America, intending to research the dreams of Sigmund Freud. He discovered that one of the prominent characters in Freud's dreams was the biblical figure, Moses. While researching the life of Moses, Dr. Velikovsky began to suspect that the plagues which happened in Egypt were, in fact, a product of powerful forces of nature which had been stirred up worldwide by some agent he could not at first identify. He looked at traditions and stories from other peoples and other cultures which described events similar to those recorded in Hebrew accounts of their last days in Egypt. He believed that some common factor tied together all these ancient accounts, and eventually he felt that he had found it: a bright celestial object described as at times rivaling the sun in brightness. Ancient astronomers and seers, he said, had been tracking and recording this object in the skies for hundreds of years. It had apparently attracted their attention because it, alone, had no set path through the heavens, seeming to roam at will all

over the sky. Somewhere around the year 1500 B.C. as the object appeared from behind the sun, stargazers fearfully watched it growing larger in the sky than it had ever grown before. Dr. Velikovsky believed that the Hebrew account of the plagues which struck Egypt near the end of their time of living there describes the effects of Earth's first near-collision with that particular celestial object."

"And you believe that is what is happening on the viewscreen?" asked Scott.

"No, Sir," Kramer replied. "According to Dr. Velikovsky's theory, what I just described to you was not the event on the screen. Instead, it was the first of a long series of near-collisions which eventually resulted in something similar to what is depicted on the screen."

"What do you mean by 'something similar'?" Scott asked.

"Dr. Velikovsky believed that this renegade celestial object which almost collided with the Earth in 1500 B.C. eventually became the planet Venus, but that was to happen over eight hundred years later. During those eight-hundred years, the celestial object moved in an eccentric orbit around the sun, approaching Earth every fifty years, though never again close

enough to cause the level of destruction experienced on its 1500 B.C. approach. Sometime during those eight-hundred years the solar system changed again when the celestial object, on the outward leg of its orbit, nearly collided with Mars. The exchange in orbital energy between the two bodies caused the object to fall to the orbit presently occupied by Venus, and it never again threatened the Earth. However, there was a new threat in the skies: Mars, which had assumed its own eccentric orbit which could threaten Earth. After a number of close approaches, Mars made its last, and most notable approach in the year 687 B.C. I believe the day was March 23. At that time the two bodies passed so closely to each other that there was an energy discharge between them. Dr. Velikovsky believed that this flash of energy was what destroyed an Assyrian army, led by Emperor Sennacherib, which was besieging the Judean city of Jerusalem. He also believed this last near-collision placed Earth and Mars in the orbits they now occupy."

After a short period of silence Scott commented, "I have to admit that's quite a story. I'm wondering why history doesn't tell us that all these things actually happened that way."

Kramer thought for a moment. "Dr. Velikovsky believed that though these events were recorded all

around the world, they were not scientifically recorded. Instead, they were explained in terms consistent with regional religions and beliefs which are no longer properly understood. He also theorized that some of the experiences were so traumatic for the survivors that some of them experienced a collective amnesia, a purging of their frightening memories."

"Interesting," Scott agreed, "but arguing those points won't solve any of our problems. You still haven't described what is depicted on the viewscreen: the two planets colliding."

"Sorry, Sir," apologized Kramer. "There is an important difference. In Dr. Velikovsky's narrative, Mars misses Earth. Civilization survives. In the viewscreen scenario, both planets collide. It's not a totally accurate Velikovsky scenario, Sir, but it's so close. It involves bodies similar to Mars and Earth, and Mr. Spock's stellar drift and time regression simulation placed us in the time period corresponding to the last supposed near-collision in 687 B.C. Sir, we studied the advanced races at the Academy. I've read the record of your meeting with Trelane. Apparently he can put an entire planet where he wants it. In addition, we are assuming he has read Velikovsky. Tell me why he could not have brought our two ships back into a time and a history he has invented by

altering the orbit of one of the planets involved in the Velikovsky scenario. It would need only a little push to the right planet at the right time..."

"Mr. Kramer, your arguments are backing me into a very tight corner," admitted Scott. "What do you think it will take to either prove or disprove your theory?"

"We should do some detailed scans of the third planet," said Kramer, "mainly looking for levels of technology and population patterns. It's highly unlikely that another class M planet could exist in a nearly perfect copy of the Terran system having the same geography, cultural development, and population patterns as the original Earth."

"Alright, Mr. Kramer, your little scheme has my blessing," said Scott. "You and Mr. Sulu are hereby appointed a committee of two to decide if that planet really is Earth. Get right on it."

As Kramer and Sulu left the briefing room, Scott returned to the computer monitor which now displayed Spock's cryptic message. As he saw things, there was one more puzzle waiting to be unraveled.

---- CHAPTER TEN ----

As nearly as he remembered, Captain James Kirk had been on the bridge of the Enterprise, directing the ship's response to the attack of the Romulan Warbird. And then he remembered Trelane appearing, attired in some unfamiliar archaic military costume and making some disassociated remark about a game. In the next instant he had found himself standing next to Spock on what appeared to be solid ground. It was nighttime, dark, and cold. The sky overhead was clear, and he could make out what appeared to be familiar constellations. Apparently, Kirk suspected, he was to believe that he was in the northern hemisphere of his native planet, Earth.

They were standing on a slight rise, and in the distance they could see the silhouette of a city surrounded by a massive, high wall. Arrayed before each of the barely visible gates in the wall were hundreds of flickering lights, most likely small campfires, suggesting that travelers who had arrived after the gates had been secured for the night were waiting until morning to enter the city.

Spock had walked several paces away, totally immersed in his study of the surroundings. For the moment, the two of them appeared to be alone.

Suddenly and silently Trelane was with them, covered in long, flowing robes from head to foot. He leaned comfortably with his shoulder against a tree. When he cleared his throat Kirk and Spock turned to face him.

"I wonder if I might have a word with you two gentlemen," he said nonchalantly.

Kirk's patience was exhausted. Too many times when he had seemed on the verge of acquiring control of a situation, Trelane had appeared and had snatched that control from his grasp. He lunged at the cool figure of Trelane and grasped the folds of his robes at the sides of his neck. He roughly pulled Trelane fully onto his feet, bringing Trelane's astonished face scant inches away from his own. Barely controlling his rage inside, Kirk suddenly stopped and stared at the wide-eyed and now widely grinning face of Trelane. He then pushed Trelane back to nearly arm's length and with a slight backward push, released him.

"Wonderful, Captain!" Trelane shouted. "I knew you had it in you! Such fury! Such passion! Such emotion!"

Trelane's attempts to further provoke were interrupted by a woman's desperate cries for help. Kirk and Spock spun around, searching for the source

of the cries. The ground sloped into a slight depression and a thin cluster of trees. Incriminating shadows and noises of a scuffle were coming from among them. Kirk angrily thrust a finger toward Trelane's face, declaring, "I will finish this with you later!", before turning and sprinting toward the trees. Spock followed behind Kirk.

"Very well, have it your way," said Trelane, not in the least offended. "There are other game pieces to be moved into place."

Kirk and Spock dashed into the cluster of trees and discovered five large men engaged in trying to forcibly remove several bags and satchels from the arms of a woman and an adolescent boy. The two outnumbered victims were putting up a valiant resistance. Kirk dashed into the fray, pulling one of the assailants off the woman and hurling him forcefully against a nearby tree. Joining Kirk, Spock applied a nerve pinch to one of the men harassing the child. Struggling to maintain his hold, Spock was left with his back exposed to the child's other assailant who pushed the child away and threw himself at Spock, wrapping his powerful hands around Spock's neck to choke him. The child, on the ground but now free to move, grasped a hefty stick upon which his hand had fallen. He stood up and raised the meter-long club over his

head, and then brought it down in a surprisingly strong blow onto the back of the man choking Spock. The man was badly stunned, both arms flying fully extended. He staggered, turning to face the new threat from his rear. He grunted, bringing his arms forward, and tried to grasp the neck of the child. The child swung his stick under the man's arms and into his ribs stopping him where he stood. Spock, meanwhile, had totally incapacitated the first thief and turned to find the second one doubled over, an easy target for another nerve pinch.

After having flung the first of the woman's assailants against the tree, Kirk grabbed a second and dragged him away from the woman, smashing him squarely in the middle of his face with a fist. The stunned second man staggered back and collapsed onto the first thief, who had been attempting to stand and rejoin the fight.

The third of the woman's assailants, fearing for his own safety now that he was outnumbered, had decided to leave. He had only started to run when the child threw himself at the man's legs and wrapped his arms around them. The third thief fell roughly to the ground, and after a moment's unproductive struggle, began to flail at the child's back and shoulders. Kirk pulled the child away, intending to deal with the last

thief himself. The thief leaped to his feet and produced a dagger, while the child, behind Kirk, attempted to push past Kirk and engage the thief. Kirk held onto the child and took several steps back. Spock followed Kirk's example and did not attempt to disarm the thief with the dagger. Seizing the clear opportunity to leave, the armed thief turned and ran into the night, as did the two men Kirk had previously dispatched.

Aware that the two thieves stunned by Spock's nerve pinches would eventually reawaken, Kirk began gathering the scattered possessions of the woman and child together. While the woman and the child comforted each other, Kirk pulled Spock aside. "Those two ruffians appear to be about our size," he said, nodding in the direction of the remaining unconscious thieves.

"An excellent point, Captain," Spock agreed as he studied them. "Our Starfleet uniforms are not in keeping with prevailing modes of attire."

Kirk rolled one of the unconscious bodies onto its stomach and removed the outer robes, while Spock did the same to the other. As Kirk threw his new costume onto his back and performed finishing adjustments, he became uncomfortably aware of Spock staring at him. "Is something wrong, Spock?"

he asked.

"Your outer garment has a hood, Captain, while mine is simply a coat," said Spock. "As I have certain obvious physical differences from the local inhabitants, would I not better remain inconspicuous with my differences shrouded in a hooded garment?"

Kirk examined the two garments. "An excellent point," he agreed. "We'll trade."

When they were suitably attired, Kirk and Spock returned to the woman and child. "Perhaps it would be safer to move to another place for the rest of the night," Kirk suggested to the woman, "just in case those thieves return."

The woman slowly turned her head to look at Kirk. "And what do you intend to do with us when we reach your 'other place'?" she asked, crying. "How do we know that you also are not thieves or something worse? If you must, take our food. Take all our possessions. Just leave us alone."

Kirk slowly knelt before the sobbing woman and gently placed a finger beneath her chin to lift her face. Looking into her eyes, he said, "We are not thieves, nor are we anything worse. We are not going to take your possessions. It is not safe for you to be out here

alone, so, with your permission, we are offering to help you. We will look out for you, at least until you find family or friends who can care for you."

The woman looked into Kirk's eyes, and in them found someone she could trust. "Thank you - I don't even know your names," she said, trying to smile. "These are times when strangers are not easily trusted. I am Miriam, and this is my younger brother, Joash."

"Pleased to meet you both," said Kirk, returning her smile. "I am Jim, and my companion is named Spock."

"Jim? Spock? What strange names," observed Miriam.

"My parents named me James," said Kirk. "Jim is something my friends call me. As for Spock, he insists that 'Spock' is the only part of his full name that I am capable of pronouncing. I've learned to trust his judgement on things like that."

"I am familiar with the name James," said Miriam. "I shall call you James, and I shall be your friend. And I shall also befriend your companion, Spock."

"Good," Kirk smiled. "Now that we've all been introduced, I think we should start moving to a

different place."

Miriam agreed and stood up with Kirk. They all reached into the pile of bags together, Spock and Joash grasping the shoulder strap for the same bag.

"I can carry this," asserted Joash. "I'm not just a kid anymore."

"Indeed, you are not," Spock acknowledged. "Your efforts tonight have been much appreciated."

With a very pleased grin, Joash lifted the bag onto his shoulder, and Kirk smiled at Spock, who was trying his best to suppress any sign of emotion. When the remaining bags were distributed they moved out of the cluster of trees. Miriam led the group toward the fires outside the nearest of the gates. As they walked, Kirk dropped behind, intending to discuss their situation with Spock.

As they walked together, Kirk asked, "Do you have any idea where we are, Spock?"

"As none of the inhabitants has mentioned anything specific, I have only theories," Spock admitted.

"Anything would help," said Kirk, hoping to coax something of relevance out of Spock's thoughts. "For instance, the sky. The constellations..."

"Yes," Spock mused, looking upward. "Apparently, Earth, northern hemisphere, and judging from the stars which are visible, approximately thirty degrees north latitude. The costumes we have encountered suggest southwestern Asia. Possibly the regions of Mesopotamia or Arabia. It is difficult to be certain, but the architecture of the city silhouetted against the night sky suggests that we are near the Mediterranean Sea. Palestine, perhaps."

"Pretty precise theories, when you consider that we could be just about anywhere," remarked Kirk. Spock did not acknowledge what Kirk had said. Instead, he continued to think as they drew closer to the fires. Kirk tried again to get Spock to open his thoughts. "Have you come up with anything else?"

"Only another possibility, Captain," Spock answered. "Events unfolding aboard the Enterprise before we were brought here were beginning to connect us to a point in Dr. Velikovsky's scenario, which in his accounting of this period of Earth's history happened in 687 B.C. For several previous years, Hezekiah, a regional king, had refused to pay his kingdom's required tribute to the Emperor of Assyria, who had previously conquered most of the lands around Judah, including the northern kingdom of Israel. In this year, the Assyrian emperor,

Sennacherib, led his armies into Judah and laid siege to the major cities, hoping to suppress Hezekiah's rebellion. King Hezekiah, in his capital city of Jerusalem, was saved from defeat when the Assyrian force surrounding Jerusalem was mysteriously stricken dead one evening, in accordance with a prophecy of deliverance. Dr. Velikovsky attributed this deliverance to an energy discharge between Earth and the orbitally displaced planet Mars, occurring as Mars passed its closest to Earth, and striking the ground where the Assyrian forces were camped outside Jerusalem."

"But our information on the Enterprise showed that the two planets were going to collide, not merely pass closely by each other," Kirk reminded Spock.

"True, Captain - a disturbing deviation from the Velikovsky scenario," Spock acknowledged calmly. "I do not know if the Velikovsky scenario is an accurate account of this period in your planet's history, but it, or a variation of it, seems to be the most likely explanation for the events Trelane has arranged for us."

"We'd be in a better position to do something about Trelane's arrangements if we could return to the ship," declared Kirk.

"Agreed," said Spock. "But for the moment, I believe it would be prudent to find shelter within the walls of the city before us. I am concerned by this migration of people toward it. This could be the time of the Assyrian army's invasion, and if memory serves, the Assyrians were not known for treating their captives kindly."

"Alright," Kirk finally said to Spock. "Tomorrow we'll see what safety we can find in the city."

Their group had reached the area of the outer campfires. Around each of the fires they could dimly make out the shapes of people asleep on the ground, along with the flickering outlines of watchmen who sat awake to guard their respective group's few possessions.

Miriam had still been leading them. She stopped on a level site and asked, "Will this be safe enough, James?"

Kirk looked around. They were near enough to other campfires to call for help, if needed, yet far enough away so as not to appear that they were intruding into another group's domain.

"This is probably as good as things will get until morning," Kirk admitted. "The two of you can try to

get some sleep. Spock and I will stand watch."

"We will rest after we have built a fire," Miriam insisted. "Joash, collect our belongings together, and then help gather whatever will burn. Tomorrow we shall take our new friends, James and Spock, to the home of our uncle in Jerusalem. He will want to thank them for taking care of us."

Surprised, Kirk said, "Jerusalem?"

"Yes," answered Miriam, puzzled by Kirk's reaction. "Why are you surprised that this is Jerusalem?"

"We have been traveling for a long time," Kirk stammered, looking into the sky. He added with slightly more confidence, "I didn't think we had come this far so quickly."

"I see," said Miriam, smiling. "Come, James. Help me find wood for the fire. You can tell me about your travels."

Kirk pointed to a nearby solitary tree. "That might be the best place to start looking," he suggested.

They slowly walked toward the tree, silently for a few minutes, until Miriam asked without looking at Kirk, "Where did you and your companion come from, James?"

"Let's start with me," Kirk answered lightly. "I grew up in a place very much like this. Warm, gentle breezes in the summer, and crisp, chilling evenings like this one that foretold the coming of winter, and later were the season's farewell before spring. And then, one day, I left home in search of adventure, filled with a need to discover new things. Eventually I ended up here."

Kirk saw that Miriam was smiling. He had said a lot, essentially telling her the truth, and yet, he had told her nothing. Evidently it had amused her.

When they reached the tree they discovered that others had been there before them. All the branches within arm's reach had already been broken off. Kirk pulled himself into a fork in the trunk and broke off some of the higher branches, dropping them carefully to the ground.

"And what of Spock? Where did he come from?" Miriam asked as she retrieved the branches.

Kirk dropped lightly to the ground. "A place quite different from where I grew up," he said. "Hot, and very dry. The people there try very hard not to display their feelings. Anyway, that's what he tells me. I met Spock after setting out on my own."

"Have you ever gone home?"

"When I could," Kirk said as he took the bundle of sticks Miriam had gathered. "But now, tell me a little about you. Where do you live?"

"A little town, two day's travel along the south road from Jerusalem."

"I should think you're a little young to travel all that way alone," said Kirk. "Where are your parents?"

"They are both dead," Miriam said sadly. "Father was killed; well, he was a soldier. His death was a terrible blow to Mother, and she became very ill..."

"I'm sorry," offered Kirk. "You must miss them very much."

"Yes, I did. Joash was just a toddler, but I knew how to take care of him. I just couldn't let us be a burden on anybody, and I couldn't bear our being separated and sent to live with different relatives, so I insisted that we live in our home," Miriam said. Then she added with an endearing hint of pride, "You might say that I raised him."

"You did a wonderful job," complimented Kirk.

"I had a little help, at first. My uncle paid a neighbor to keep an eye on us, and he sent us money. With our growing up like that, Joash and I became very close. I like the way he turned out. He's nice for a little brother, the way he helps me with everything."

"Tell me, why did you leave home and come to Jerusalem?" asked Kirk.

"I got a letter from my uncle. He knows important people in the city. He practically ordered me to come and visit him for a while. Joash and I were planning to do it soon, but we heard rumors about Assyrians who were angry with our King and coming to fight."

"Will you be safe with your uncle in the city?" Kirk asked.

Miriam looked into the sky. "I don't think it matters that much."

"Why?" asked Kirk.

"Do you see the red star?"

"Yes. What about it?"

"Some people say that its appearance means the end of all things," Miriam said in awe. "Others believe it is an omen, and that we are to be punished for

something we have done wrong. Everyone is afraid of it."

"What if it is just a star?" Kirk proposed.

"No," Miriam disagreed quietly, "this one is different. It has... a special meaning."

"Well, whatever it is, do we have to worry about it tonight?" Kirk asked, trying to brighten the somber mood.

"No, probably not tonight," Miriam smiled weakly. "Let's hurry back and get our fire started."

Joash took the wood which Kirk and Miriam had brought and worked with Spock on the difficult task of coaxing damp tinder and green wood to support a fire. After a while, with the careful feeding of much of the drier available grass around them, a crackling, whistling, and smoky fire finally began to consume the wood.

"It took a while, but it's turning into a splendid fire," observed Miriam happily. "Let's gather around and warm ourselves, and then we can try to salvage what sleep the night will let us have."

Later, Miriam and Joash lay next to the fire and soon fell asleep. Spock stared into the flames for

several minutes before turning to Kirk. "You had quite a long conversation with the young lady," he said.

"Yes," agreed Kirk. "A very pleasant and informative conversation."

"Informative?"

"Yes. I've practically verified your theory that the Assyrians are on their way here."

"Ah," acknowledged Spock, thinking about that for several seconds. "Somehow I do not feel more secure in knowing that."

"I have also learned," added Kirk, "that, for one reason or another, many people are afraid of that red star in the sky."

In the constantly changing light of the fire, Spock appeared to look sad as he sought out the prominent red point of light in the night sky and then looked at the walled city. Guards patrolling high atop the wall still carried torches - a practice which would, no doubt, be curtailed when the expected Assyrian army occupied the fields around the city. "I should very much like to have a tricorder," Spock said wistfully.

"I know how you feel," Kirk sympathized. "Why

don't you get some sleep while I, as your superior officer, stand the first watch."

"I must remind you, Captain, that I do not require sleep as often as humans. Therefore, I respectfully suggest that you take advantage of this opportunity to rest, while I remain awake."

Kirk smiled. "Because it's the logical thing to do?" he asked.

"Precisely," answered Spock.

* * *

Ksariss and Kohbrah stood paralyzed. A great, bustling encampment of ancient warriors had appeared around them. Or had they, instead, appeared in the warrior's encampment? At the moment it was of little consequence. However they had arrived in the encampment, they were in grave danger. The warriors in the camp were not Romulan. Their skin tones and facial features were all wrong, and their ears were rounded. Humans, maybe, they both theorized. Even if they had both appeared in the camp with a box full of disruptors and an extra pair of

hands, Kohbrah could have guaranteed them no better chance of survival if they were noticed.

Strangely, though, they had not been noticed. In fact, several of the warriors had already brushed by them, paying them practically no attention at all. Fearful that their fortuitous run of good luck could abruptly end, Kohbrah took a firm hold of Ksariss' arm and guided her into the shadow of a nearby tree where they would not be so brightly illuminated by the torchlight which marked the heavily traveled avenue through the camp.

Ksariss, very much on edge, jerked her arm free of Kohbrah's grip. From the affronted look on her face Kohbrah knew that Ksariss was preparing another stinging tirade of insults with which to censure him. He placed a finger on his lips, his expression imploring her to be silent. He softly whispered, "There are more important concerns at this moment than berating each other!"

The logic of Kohbrah's statement seemed to cool Ksariss' inflamed indignation. After a moment, feeling more rational, she looked at what she was wearing. Her Romulan uniform had been replaced with costume, armor, and armament exactly like that worn by the warrior who had appeared on the Talon's bridge. Her apparel, and that of Kohbrah, also

matched that of the warriors who purposefully scurried throughout the camp. She suddenly felt the weight of the sword and dagger suspended from the belt around her waist. As she examined the belt, she discovered a small leather pouch also attached to it by leather thongs. She unfastened the pouch and opened it, discovering inside several metal coins. She extracted them from the pouch and held them in her hand. The coins were all of the same size and design, and bore the same human likeness on one side. She examined each of the coins carefully in the low light, turning them over slowly in her hand. Gradually a very smug look settled onto Ksariss' face, as though she had just solved a very ambiguous riddle.

"Do you know what they are? Do they tell you anything?" asked Kohbrah excitedly.

"You have obviously spent little time studying those history tapes I found in your former quarters, Commander," said Ksariss, putting on a superior air. "I don't know how or why, but we are on Earth, in an Assyrian army camp. I can't be sure which campaign this force is engaged in, but the costumes, and the artwork on these coins place us at a point in time during the height of their empire. I am unsure whether the current emperor is Sargon, or his son, Sennacherib..."

"You are forgetting that it does not matter who the current emperor is," charged Kohbrah. "He rules an empire on a doomed planet, a planet which will be destroyed in a short time. Along with us, unless we discover some way to leave."

"You have a point, Commander," admitted Ksariss, who was secretly pleased with her continuing ability to annoy Kohbrah. "We should be working on a way to relay our location to our ship. But first, we must escape from this encampment. The history tapes revealed that these Assyrians were exceptionally cruel to prisoners taken during time of war."

"I'm afraid I cannot allow you to do that," said a good-natured voice near them.

The smiling Assyrian warrior who stood near them in the shadows seemed to be the same one who had appeared before them on the bridge of the Talon. He stood with his left hand on his hip, his elbow jauntily thrust to the rear. His right arm, extended full-length, clutched a tall spear. Both Romulans made instinctive grabs for their hand disruptors, which they expected to find secured at their sides. Unfortunately these weapons had disappeared, along with their Romulan uniforms.

"Still not quite proficient in the arts of ancient

combat, I see," said the amused and smirking warrior. "Now really, don't you think these would have been more appropriate?"

As he spoke, he gracefully swept his left hand before himself, palm upward. Kohbrah and Ksariss felt the swords which had been hanging from their belts instantly appear in their hands. Ksariss raised the point of her weapon and leveled it at the warrior.

"O-o-oh! You catch on quickly. Ver-ry good!" the warrior jeered, dropping his spear in mock surprise. "But I must, in all fairness, serve this warning: if you persist in maintaining this aggressive posture toward me, you will learn that I am something of an accomplished swordsman myself! In fact, if memory serves, I haven't lost a duel in several centuries."

As Ksariss lowered her sword, Kohbrah hissed, "Just who are you?"

"Why, I am Trelane, my good Romulan Commander!" beamed the warrior as he began to strut around them. "Retired General Trelane, of late, the Squire of Gothos. Passionate student and practitioner of 'affaires militaires', and renowned throughout the galaxy as THE eminent authority on any aspect of the military arts."

"And what does this list of self-imparted plaudits have to do with us?" demanded Kohbrah.

"Nothing less than the fact that it was I who brought you all here!" exclaimed Trelane, fairly radiating enthusiasm. "Their Enterprise, and your Talon. To state everything simply, I have chosen you to assist me in my greatest quest!"

The two Romulans looked at each other blankly, as nothing Trelane had said made the slightest bit of sense.

"You still don't seem to understand," said Trelane, puzzled and disappointed. "How can I explain this? Ah, I have it! How would you both feel if I was to simply give you James Kirk, to do with as you please?"

"Excuse me," interrupted Ksariss, "but, just how does our simply receiving James Kirk fit in with any quest, or with our apparent entrapment here on this doomed planet?"

"James Kirk needs to learn that only fools oppose my wishes," Trelane explained with an air of superiority and mystery. "I owe Kirk one. I owe him a BIG one! To repay him for past undeserved and intolerable humiliations, I have arranged, first, the annihilation of civilization on his home planet, and

then, the total destruction OF his home planet. Think of it; no Earth to attract those curious Vulcans. Humans and Vulcans never meet, so the United Federation of Planets is never formed. Imagine, a galaxy littered with unaligned, solitary worlds, each one alone against the might of the Romulan Empire as it expands into these rich sectors of the galaxy. You've asked about James Kirk? I simply place him in your custody, and then, from a tiny window in his Romulan prison cell, he can witness the destruction of everything he holds dear. With humanity out of the picture, time will have been changed so that Kirk's past will have never existed. If he is allowed to live, he will see his Romulan enemies forge the greatest empire of its time. So you see, my Romulan friends, in my plan there is something for you, and something for me."

"What will you get out of this plan," asked Ksariss.

"Simply that without a United Federation of Planets, in which James Kirk attains the rank of Starship Captain, the problematic encounters I have previously had with Captain Kirk will never have occurred. In the new order, my once spotless record will be vindicated, whereupon I can return to Gothos and pursue the delights of my retirement with complete peace of mind."

Kohbrah was becoming more than a little concerned. By the look in Ksariss' eyes, he could see that she was being seduced by the enticing lure of Squire Trelane's scheme. She was all but salivating over the chance to have the upper hand over James Kirk, who had attempted to deliver her to a Federation prison, and who had tasked her relentlessly since her rescue from the Enterprise. Her personal vendetta against Kirk was not what gave Kohbrah the greatest cause for concern, however, but rather that she was willing to risk a major change in the events of the past to have her revenge. She was, no doubt, hoping to return to Romulus with Kirk in tow to be honored for her part in defeating the Federation. But, would a different Romulan Empire remember or even acknowledge Ksariss? It certainly would not remember a nonexistent race of humans. Obviously, this business of altering established time lines could be tricky and unpredictable, and it was a business in which Kohbrah was very reluctant to become involved. At the moment, he and Ksariss were aliens in a hostile place and time. Their best chance of surviving lay in escaping together as quickly as possible with the least possible contact with anyone else. This meant somehow breaking the spell Trelane was weaving around Ksariss before she became convinced to do something perilous and unwise.

"...and if we should help you, when would you deliver James Kirk to us?" Ksariss was asking.

"I'm glad you asked that," responded a delighted Trelane. "First, we need to introduce a few small changes to the Assyrian battle plan, and then we can go to collect Captain Kirk."

"Ambassador, please!" implored Kohbrah.

Ksariss spun around and eyed Kohbrah firmly. "Let me remind you what this is all about, Commander. Revenge! A balancing of the scales between myself and James Kirk! It is a shame that you are as ignorant of Klingon culture as you are about quality Klingon furniture. Our barbaric Klingon allies have a saying about revenge: that it is a dish best served cold. The galaxy has never seen a person as cold as I shall be to Captain James Kirk. So, Commander, I shall hear this Trelane out, and if I deem his proposals workable, you will assist me in their implementation. Is that understood?"

Through clenched teeth, Kohbrah responded, "Understood, Ambassador."

---- CHAPTER ELEVEN ----

There it floated, alone and taunting in the middle of an otherwise blank computer screen.

Investigate SABAT / 7 ? / Earth 1968

Lt. Commander Scott, still working with the computer terminal in the briefing room, was profoundly puzzled by Spock's vague log entry.

What could Spock possibly have hoped to learn from investigating one of the recent additions to the ship's crew? Did the entry refer to the crewman's name, or to something that sounded like it?

Whatever could the number seven mean? Seven what?

Earth 1968. Probably a location and a date. Could it be associated with a place, an event; and if so, where to start looking for information about it? Earth 1968. Scott turned the phrase over in his mind several times. Some clouded memory or association still feebly cried out for recognition, but he could not draw it out. He needed more to go on. There were many

questions, and consequently many possibilities. It was time to start eliminating some of them.

"Computer," Scott said, "search all memory banks for the name Sabat, S-A-B-A-T, and report associations with any significant event."

"Working," reported the emotionless monotone voice of the computer as it began churning through its enormous data store. Scott drummed the table's surface with his fingers as the computer completed its task and responded, "Report ready."

"Report findings," Scott directed.

"There is no record of any significant event associated with the name Sabat," the computer told him.

Scott contemplated that for a short time before attempting another investigative angle. "Alright computer, let's try this: could the word 'Sabat' have associations other than with an event or a proper name?"

"Working," said the machine as it initiated another long search. Finally it announced, "Report ready."

"I'm still listening," Scott informed the computer.

"There are two-thousand-four-hundred-and-fifty-one documented instances of phonetics matching or approximating those of the word 'Sabat'. Do you require a complete listing of these instances along with corresponding languages and indigenous planets?"

"No, computer, I do not require a complete listing. I'd like to narrow things down a bit. Let's start with the instances from the planet Earth. Report."

"Working. First instance: SABBAT - a rite or assembly associated with the practice of witchcraft. Second instance: SABBATH - a word having roots in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew terms referring to a time of rest, originally the seventh day of the week. Third instance: SHABBAT - the Hebrew weekday number seven..."

"Computer, stop," commanded Scott. The computer had made repeated references to the number seven. If this was the connection between Sabat and seven, all it proved was that the man's name might have been derived from ancient terms for a number. There had to be more to Spock's puzzle. He would not have made such an entry in his official log if there was not.

Scott moved on to the last segment of Spock's log entry. "Computer, search the history banks. Report

all significant events from the planet Earth in the year 1968."

"Working. North Vietnamese forces launch Tet Offensive against South Vietnamese and American forces. Prominent American figures, Dr. Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy are assassinated. Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dispatches tanks and aircraft to Czechoslovakia to suppress attempts at liberal reforms. America's first attempt to launch an Orbital Nuclear Weapons Platform results in launch-aborted detonation of the device when it fails to achieve orbit. High level talks are initiated between major military powers on limiting orbital weapons systems..."

"Computer, stop!" exclaimed Scott. Of course! The Orbital Nuclear Weapons Platforms! Memories flooded back to him.

Spock's theoretical slingshot-around-the-sun technique for time travel. The mission, back to Earth's 1968 to gather historical data. A powerful alien transporter beam, accidentally intercepted. A grim humanoid holding a sleek, nervous black cat, materializing on the transporter pad, claiming to be from Earth and yet sponsored by a secretive, benevolent alien race trying to stop Earth's embarkation on a path to self-destruction by

launching those orbital weapons systems. Kirk trying to block the humanoid's attempts to disable the orbital weapons system's launch rocket until he became convinced that allowing the humanoid to destroy the weapon was the proper path for history to follow. It had been the weapon's flawed launch which had inspired world leaders to negotiate the milestone agreement banning such weapons. The humanoid had used the name Gary Seven.

Investigate SABAT / 7 ? / Earth 1968

Obviously Spock had begun to suspect this connection.

"Computer," said Scott, "access Enterprise mission file ASSIGNMENT: EARTH. Scan all related log tapes for a picture of someone named Gary Seven. When you find it, I'd like to have a look."

"Working."

A moment later the hard, determined, and even slightly annoyed visage of Gary Seven was displayed on Scott's monitor, exactly as he had appeared on the transporter pad at their first encounter.

"Computer, can we close in on the face of the human, please?"

As a close-up image of Gary Seven filled the monitor screen, Scott imparted additional commands to the computer. "Computer, redraw this display to half-screen. Then, access the ship's personnel records and find me a picture of Ensign Gari Sabat. Display it to half-screen."

In a moment the bearded countenance of Ensign Sabat was displayed next to that of Gary Seven. Scott studied the two faces and nodded his head in satisfaction. "Now we're getting somewhere," he said. "Computer, remove the facial hair from the picture of Ensign Sabat."

The computer reconstructed the image of Sabat without his beard and mustache, and revealed a striking resemblance between the two faces. Scott smiled broadly and directed a last command at the computer.

"Computer, compute the odds of both pictures being of the same individual."

There was a slight pause as the computation was made. "The assumption that both pictures depict the same individual computes to a ninety-nine-point-

nine-eight percent probability of being true."

"Well, now, isn't that interesting?" said Scott, pleased and leaning back in his chair with his arms folded. "Computer, save these images and all related data. I will most definitely want to review them again."

Scott left the briefing room and headed for the turbolift to the bridge. At the end of the short ride the turbolift's doors hissed open, and Scott walked onto the bridge. Lt. Uhura stood and surrendered the command chair to him. Scott thanked her and sat down. "What's our status, Lieutenant?" he asked.

"The Romulans are very quiet, just sitting out there, Sir," Uhura reported. "They have not attempted to communicate with anybody. We still haven't detected any warp system's power generation from them. Sir, Mr. Kramer has a report for you, if you would like to hear it."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Scott as he arose and approached the science station. "What do you have for me, Mr. Kramer?"

"Sir, we've just completed a thorough population density survey of the planet," said Kramer excitedly. "Based on the expected population patterns for this

time in Earth's history, I'd say we have a nearly perfect match. We've also made some geographical and geological scans. Their results also support the hypothesis that this is Earth."

"My thanks to you and Mr. Sulu for your work, Mr. Kramer," said Scott. "I was kind of expecting that would be your conclusion. For the time being we'll work with the assumption that this planet is Earth. Lt. Uhura, have there been any signs that Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock could be down there?"

"None yet, Sir," Uhura responded. "We're still monitoring."

"Carry on, Lieutenant, and be very thorough. That planet is the most logical place they'll be."

Scott returned to the command chair and silently reviewed his options. There was little more he could do to search for Kirk and Spock while saddled with monitoring an unfriendly Romulan warship. No doubt some of the crew wondered why he hadn't sent landing parties to the planet's surface. If anyone had asked, his answer would have been that it was simply too risky. What if the Romulans somehow kept them from recovering the landing parties? They would probably die when the planets collided. But if the planet believed to be Earth somehow avoided the

impending collision, what were the chances that stranded crewmen, or their offspring, or descendants many generations removed would alter key events in the planet's past? It had not been an easy decision, but without having some idea of where to look, putting crewmen on the planet would be one of the last orders he would issue. Having decided that, his thoughts passed to the problem of Ensign Sabat.

"Mr. Sulu," Scott said to the acting first officer who was seated at the science station, "when is this watch scheduled for relief?"

"In twenty minutes, Sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Sulu," Scott acknowledged as he turned the command chair toward the helm console. "Mr. Sabat, when you're relieved, I'd like a quick word with you in the briefing room. Mr. Sulu, this will concern you, as well. Please join us."

After waiting for acknowledgement of his orders, Scott left the bridge, heading for the recreation room and a quick bite to eat. He asked for a light meal from the food synthesizer and took it to an unoccupied table. As he picked indifferently at his food a shadow fell across the table. It appeared to Scott that the shadow was that of a human form, so he turned to investigate. Dr. McCoy's smiling face greeted him,

asking, "Mind if I join you, Scotty?"

"Suit yourself, Doctor," responded Scott gloomily, "but be warned, I'm not in a mood to be good company."

"Worried about Jim and Spock?" McCoy asked as he slid into a chair.

"Aye, that I am," Scott admitted.

"Me, too," said McCoy, "but, we have to remember, they're a very resourceful pair."

"Aye, they are," Scott forced a small smile. "In fact, that's something I'm forced to count on."

"I'll bet you'll be happy to know that my patient, Captain Gayul, is doing much better," said McCoy.

Scott put down his fork and stared at McCoy. "Doctor, I get the impression that you're trying to force me to engage in conversation."

"Part of my job," said McCoy as he finished the last morsels of food on his plate, "is to check up on whoever's in charge of the ship once in a while."

"I see," said Scott, "and if I indulge you in your need for conversation, I'll get some nice comments in your

report on me."

"It wouldn't hurt," grinned McCoy as he pushed his plate back.

"Alright, then, how much better is your patient doing, Doctor?"

"I'm glad you asked, Scotty. He's out of danger, alert, sitting up, and he's asked for access to our computer's literary tapes to help pass the time."

Scott became very serious as he said, "You'll want to keep a close watch on him if you let him into the computers, Doctor. Ever since that escapee from the Eugenics Wars, Kahn, almost hijacked this ship, I've pressed Starfleet for stiffer security safeguards on our sensitive information."

"But they have installed safeguards, Scotty."

"Aye, superficial safeguards. Compromises, really, between the need for security and the broad-based need for everybody on a starship to know something about how it runs."

"I can see your point," McCoy conceded. "I've been so pleased with the progress he's finally made, I guess I forgot that we know very little about him. I'll have my staff keep an eye on him."

"I'd feel better if you would, Doctor," said Scott. "Now you can go and write that complimentary report you promised me, because I have an important appointment in the briefing room I must keep."

Scott arrived in the briefing room minutes before Sulu appeared in the doorway. "Ah, Mr. Sulu, come in, quickly," Scott invited. "Take a few minutes to see what has come to light."

Sulu responded to Scott's discoveries with a low whistle. "What do we do about this, Sir?" he asked.

"I aim to find out why he's here," said Scott firmly. "Unless I miss my guess, he's working on the same problem as we are. If he is who I think he is, I'm going to suggest that we pool our information and resources."

As Scott finished speaking, Ensign Sabat stuck his head into the briefing room. "You wanted to see me, Sir?" he asked.

"Aye, I did," Scott affirmed. "Come in, Ensign, and have a seat. There are a few things I'd like to show you."

As Sabat occupied a seat across the table from Scott, Spock's log entry appeared on the table's computer

screen: "Investigate SABAT / 7 ? / Earth 1968."

"I discovered this in Commander Spock's science log, Ensign," said Scott, "and I was hoping you could help me make some sense out of it."

As Sabat studied the screen his face remained impassive. "I'm sorry, Sir. I have no idea what that could mean," he innocently stated.

"I can understand that," said Scott. "It was a real puzzler for me, too, until I started digging around a little. Let me show you where my investigation led me. Computer, display transcript of mission file ASSIGNMENT: EARTH."

Sabat dutifully read the computer transcript of the file Scott had previously explored. At times the faintest trace of a smile almost formed on his face, but it was quickly replaced with his convincing look of innocence.

"Very interesting, Sir," said Sabat, elbows now on the table, and hands folded under his chin. "But I still don't understand what all this has to do with me."

"Very well," Scott patiently said. "Computer, replay the sequence of pictures from the Sabat/Seven file."

Sabat sat through the full sequence of pictures

three times, and then smiling, finally said, "That is an amazing resemblance, Sir. Truly impressive. But what purpose is served by showing me these things?"

"What purpose?" asked Scott, amazed that Sabat still clung to his feigned innocence. "It's proof enough to me that you are a gentleman we previously encountered under the name of Gary Seven. Do you see that cat?" he indicated by pointing at a full picture of Gary Seven on the transporter pad. "If I have to, I can access the bridge log tape which shows a cat holding on to your shirt during the last Romulan attack on us. The two creatures look the same to me, and I'd bet good money the computers could verify a match between them."

"You're grasping at straws, Commander," said Sabat. "Are there any more circumstantial proofs you want to air?"

"Look, Mister," said Scott sternly, "I've inherited a situation that only seems to get worse every time I so much as think about it. The ship's Captain and First Officer are missing, and I've got a hostile Romulan warship orbiting my home planet. They may have personnel on the planet, poking into things and potentially altering its history. If it even has a history any more - what with it going to be shattered by a collision with a planet which shouldn't be heading for

it in the first place. I'm not very far away from being the Captain of a ship and a crew without a home and a past. So you can see that I haven't a great deal of time to sit here and play games!"

"Well then, in the interest of saving time, I'll admit that you've uncovered my identity," said Sabat flatly.

Scott was completely at a loss for a response, and Sulu glanced uncertainly between the two men.

"I am he whom you remember as Gary Seven," Sabat confessed. He pulled back the sleeve of his uniform shirt and pressed one of several small illuminated buttons on a bracelet. "Actually, I was hoping to be discovered."

"I - don't understand," Scott said in amazement.

"As a rule, my sponsors try to keep their benevolent endeavors under wraps," Sabat explained. "However, after considering the seriousness of this situation and the fact that I would be working with your crew, I felt that we would be more effective cooperating openly. My sponsors granted me the freedom to act along those lines, but only if I could not maintain the identity of Ensign Sabat. As you can see, I chose not to hide my presence too deeply. The facts are that both of us have resources that may be needed."

"You're offering to cooperate with us?" asked Scott.

"I am," assured Sabat, "but there are a few ground rules. First, as much as possible, I'll need to maintain my identity as a member of your crew. There is no sense showing my cards to Trelane before the proper time. And second, with respect to our situation, there has to be complete and open access to information between us."

"I have no objection to agreeing to that," said Scott.

The door to the briefing room opened unexpectedly. At first it appeared that no one was waiting to enter, until Scott and Sulu looked down and saw a black cat walking regally into the room. It leaped onto Sabat's lap and settled on its haunches, looking Scott squarely in the eye. Scott was distracted by its collar of bright white stones: he remembered a passing mention of it from the ASSIGNMENT: EARTH mission file transcript.

As Sabat stroked the cat under its ear he said, "Gentlemen, it's time I presented my associate, Isis."

Scott looked from Sabat to the cat, Isis, several times, stammered, stumbled over a few words, and then recovered enough to say to the cat, "Pleased to make your acquaintance, I'm sure."

He wondered if he should offer to shake the cat's paw. Isis, he remembered, could change her shape, having once appeared for a short time as a stunningly beautiful woman. He was certain he could have handled the introduction better if she had chosen to appear to him in that guise.

"You should remember, Commander Scott, that Isis and I may find it necessary to work together," explained Sabat.

"As you wish," said Scott, after taking a moment to get used to the idea. "Tell me something before I lose the thought: are you responsible for setting off Mr. Spock's mysterious intruder alert?"

"I admit doing that," Sabat confessed, "and modifying your computer records to cover my arrival. Don't worry. I'll put everything back the way it was when I leave."

"Well, we've cleared up one of the ship's problems," Scott chuckled. "It looks as if our luck has taken a turn for the better."

"I hate to put a damper on your celebration, Mr. Scott," said Sabat seriously, "but perhaps we should be moving along. I'm interested in what your crew has learned about what has happened."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Sabat," apologized Scott. "One moment, please, while I organize my thinking."

An instant later Scott said, "I think I have it all straight now. We believe we've been somehow brought about three thousand years into the past - and this we attribute to an old adversary of ours, a juvenile delinquent named Trelane - and we are at the moment orbiting the planet Earth which will soon be struck by the system's fourth planet, Mars, which, thanks to Trelane's intervention, has abandoned the orbit it should have forty-nine million miles from here. Captain Kirk and Commander Spock have been kidnapped by Trelane, and are somewhere with him, probably being used as pawns in one of his playacting schemes. As to how those infernal Romulans fit into things, I haven't a clue."

"You seem to have uncovered some of the basic facts, and you've filled the gaps pretty accurately with your suppositions," said Sabat. "Trelane has effected some changes to your star system's past which so far haven't had a significant impact on the time line, but he has created the potential for a significant time disturbance which has my sponsors very concerned. That's why I was sent here: to intervene and discourage the occurrence of the disturbance."

"Why is Earth so important to your sponsors?"

asked Scott.

"Because its unified government will be one of the founding members of the United Federation of Planets," explained Sabat. "If this organization is not established, a different social order will someday dominate this section of the galaxy, and it will have a profoundly negative impact far into the future. My sponsors have made it very clear that Earth must be preserved."

"Then, how is this situation to be turned around?" asked Sulu, who had listened quietly during most of Sabat's conversation with Scott.

"I'm not sure yet," Sabat admitted.

"You mean you were sent here without the means to stop Trelane?" demanded Scott.

"It was not possible to bring alternate means with me, Commander. However, the means to change your star system back to the way it was is already here. Unfortunately its location is known only to Trelane."

Disappointed, Scott stared at a far corner of the table while Sulu asked, "How about a plan, Mr. Sabat? Surely you have a plan."

"Sorry, Mr. Sulu, no plan either. It was necessary to

first study the problem before I could devise a plan. This is not a wholly accurate description of our difficulties, but I offer it to you anyway: Trelane's temporal tinkering was particularly dirty, so to speak. There was what you could think of as interference, which prevented a clear understanding of what he had done."

"Maybe you've had your problems, too, Mr. Sabat," said Scott. "I apologize for letting my emotions get the better of me. I should have realized you wouldn't have been sent here without bringing something of value."

"I have brought my knowledge, Commander," said Sabat, "and there are a few things I can do to help if the right things can be made to happen. To add to that, we have your experience and the capabilities of your starship. We might even coax our Romulan friends to cooperate a little."

"That'll be a cold day on this star system's first planet," said Scott sarcastically.

"I'm not so sure," said Sabat optimistically. "Regardless, we should start using our resources, Mr. Scott. How about assigning some creative people to work up some options for dealing with our problems?"

"Aye, that we could do," Scott agreed. "Mr. Sulu, could you start something rolling along those lines?"

"Yes, Sir!" Sulu responded.

"Good," Sabat smiled. "Now, to address a more immediate problem. You suspect that there are people from both the Enterprise and the Talon on the planet, all possessing sufficient knowledge to introduce dangerous deviations into your history. Can you locate them?"

"We haven't been able to," Scott admitted. "If they are down there, they don't have communicators. We have nothing to lock on to. The best we can do is to be alert for anything which could be an alternate way of signaling to us."

"You're probably right, Mr. Scott," Sabat agreed, "but we must get them off the surface quickly. The longer they're down there, the more chance they'll do something that should have been avoided. If you must send a landing party to assist them, I suggest that Ensign Kramer and I be allowed to go along. Mr. Kramer is quite knowledgeable about the times and the events, and I have experience which may prove useful."

"I will keep your suggestion in mind, Mr. Sabat,"

Scott said. "As far as I'm concerned, this meeting is over. I should be getting back to the bridge to see if there is some way of improving our surveillance of the planet."

---- CHAPTER TWELVE ----

When Kirk awoke he saw that the sun had become full and yellow over the horizon. Its warmth was spreading over the ground, driving the last of the night's chill from the morning air. Spock was still awake, seated by the fire and intently observing the people in the groups camped near them. Miriam was pestering Joash, trying to convince him that it was his turn to get up and prepare breakfast. Joash yielded to his older sister's persistent pleading and teasing, eventually sitting up and pulling one of the bags toward himself. When finally served, the morning meal consisted of the last of the bread and cheese Miriam and Joash had been carrying.

While they ate and gathered all their belongings Kirk further questioned Miriam, hoping to learn more about the invading Assyrian army. Adding only a little more to what she had already related, Miriam retold

how she and Joash, like everyone else in their village, had awakened three days before to reports that the Assyrians were finally moving against the rebellious Hezekiah. She hadn't actually seen any Assyrian soldiers, but she had seen village officials and their families leaving without even sending scouts to the north or to the east to verify the rumors. This was what had convinced her it was time to leave their home.

While they talked, a mounted squad of soldiers rode out from the city, emerging in a single file from a slightly opened door of the east wall's main gate. The squad split into a number of teams, four of which rode through the refugees and then fanned out in separate directions, each with an assigned section of outlying land to patrol. The remaining teams rode among the groups of refugees camped around the city. Each group received a quick but careful examination. At times a team of riders would stop to converse with refugees who were richly dressed and appeared important. These brief exchanges were too far away for Kirk to hear anything of what had been discussed. The mounted soldiers eventually reformed at a pre-arranged point and then thundered back into the city. A short time later three additional soldiers appeared on the walkway over the east gate. On command, two of the soldiers raised trumpets to their lips and blew a

loud fanfare. Scattered cheers broke out from some of the refugee groups as people shouldered their belongings and started converging on the opening east gate, apparently the only entrance which would be made available that day for admission into the city.

"Please come with us," Miriam said earnestly to Kirk and Spock, looking first at one and then the other. "I want to take you to see my Uncle Abram. He is an official in the service of the King, and a man of some importance in the city. If he will agree to let you work for him you will at least have food and more security than any other city in the path of the Assyrian army can offer."

"Well I..." Kirk started to say.

"Oh, please," Miriam begged. "After all you've done to help us since last night, he wouldn't dare turn you away."

Kirk looked to Spock for advice, and seeing no objection, he relented, "Well, if you're sure we won't be a burden to Uncle Abram. Come on, Spock. We're going to apply for a job."

Miriam and Joash smiled, pleased that Kirk and Spock would be around for a while longer, and then they started walking toward the mass of people

pressing to pass through the inadequate aperture of the east gate.

* * *

Ksariss and Kohbrah had spent the remainder of the night sleeping apart from the rest of the Assyrian troops. At sunrise they discreetly mingled with an inattentive group of reluctant early risers and collected their breakfast rations. On the lips of the few who talked as they ate was the rumor that the Emperor had been pleased with the army's progress during the previous days' marches. This apparently accounted for the additional allotment of dried meat included with the morning meal, which contained a great deal more salt than the two Romulans were accustomed to ingesting at one sitting.

"How fortunate that this planet's surface is seventy-five-percent water," muttered Kohbrah. "I shall need to drink most of it to digest whatever that was I just swallowed."

"You have a demonstrated predilection toward excessive drinking, Commander," Ksariss noted

contemptuously.

As Ksariss was speaking Trelane appeared before them covering his mouth in a vain attempt to conceal his amusement at their bickering. "You know, there are times when I seriously doubt that you are both on the same side," he teased.

The two Romulans exchanged dirty looks.

"If, perchance, you can make up your minds to work together, please pay attention," said Trelane. "I have come to explain what you must do this morning."

"Just don't forget that you promised to give us James Kirk," Ksariss reminded him.

"Precisely what I intend to do, my dear and impatient gentlewoman," beamed Trelane, "but first, you must convince the Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib to help you catch him."

Kohbrah rolled his eyes in profound disbelief, and even Ksariss momentarily regarded Trelane's sanity with suspicion, but she was too much a prisoner of her dreams of claiming James Kirk to deny Trelane an opportunity to explain.

"This little deception is going to be so much fun," Trelane bubbled. "Even you, good Commander

Kohbrah, will have a role to play: a squad commander who has just returned from a reconnaissance patrol south into Egypt. You must report convincingly to the Emperor that you found no army waiting in Egypt to march to the aid of King Hezekiah in Jerusalem. I think you'll perform quite admirably: you know what you must do, your uniform has become sufficiently soiled through the night, and you smell badly enough, I think, to convince anyone that you've recently returned from a long, hard ride."

Trelane was pleased to see that his taunting of Ksariss' companion had won her back over to his side. "And you, my lady," he gushed, as though about to shower her with riches beyond measure, "we must exchange your obscene costume for something more suitable for a beautiful woman of means, and mystery, and terrible mystic powers: a sorceress!"

Trelane passed his hands with extravagant flourish before her, and her soldier's raiment transformed into a full-length black gown, its low neckline framing a silver necklace from which dangled a jeweled crescent moon. Her naturally black hair hung straight and long over her shoulders. Rings and bracelets of exquisite craftsmanship and exotic mystical design further adorned her, and a black veil obscured her face. Kohbrah turned away, for the creature Trelane had

created painfully reminded him of why he had first begun planning the rescue of Ksariss from Federation custody. Trelane, however, waltzed in elation around his creation and broke into enthusiastic applause for himself.

"Now, all you have to do," he said excitedly to Ksariss, "is play along with what happens, and when the right time comes, simply convince Sennacherib to reconsider his plans for attacking Egypt, and turn instead toward the city of Jerusalem where Kirk will have sought refuge from the Assyrian army."

"I shall need to know more than this!" Ksariss objected. "By what means am I expected to sway the mind of this Emperor?"

"Just a simple reading," explained Trelane, "very much like a crystal ball, except that these people don't use crystal balls. Just remember that you're a sorceress, with power to see all and know all. You'll catch on. Now come, quickly. His Highness is preparing for a final meeting with his advisors. You'll be expected."

Looking very much the part of a high-ranking Assyrian officer, Trelane led them through the camp, into the heavily guarded cluster of tents reserved for the Emperor and his closest advisors. Before the

entrance to the meeting tent were stationed guards who relieved Trelane and Kohbrah of their weapons. The guards were, however, reluctant to press Ksariss to surrender any weapon she might be carrying; and, indeed, she was carrying a weapon: her dagger, which Trelane had secretly allowed to remain concealed within the folds of her gown. It gave her confidence to know she would have an initial advantage if any part of Trelane's bizarre scheme went awry. As for the guards, as long as the sorceress made no threatening moves, they were happier not involving themselves in any manner in her affairs.

After being relieved of any obvious potential threats to the Emperor, they were admitted into an antechamber which was separated from the actual meeting chamber by an ornately embroidered curtain. The Emperor's senior ministers clustered into their own tight little group, jealously eyeing Trelane in a way which suggested to Ksariss that Trelane was regarded as something of an upstart in the cadre of the Emperor's advisors: an outsider who had cultivated high favor with the Emperor before having paid his required due of extended loyal service, and, more importantly, climbing through the ranks of their private advisor's hierarchy. Several senior advisors who held military rank frowned upon the presence of Kohbrah, a mere squad commander, a low-ranking

expendable peasant among command officers who had been invited to attend this audience with the Emperor by orders which none of them had issued. They all regarded Ksariss, the sorceress, with trepidation: some, according to their own espoused superstitions, fearing the powers of any sorceress, while others, not as easily misled by magician's tricks, feared the spells she might weave to further befuddle the thinking of the Emperor. These tensions had only begun to congeal when a man opened the curtain from behind and announced, "His Highness will see you all now."

Each advisor attending the meeting entered the Emperor's chamber and bowed before the man on the throne before going to stand behind one of the cushions arranged on the floor in a semicircle at a discrete distance from the throne. Kohbrah did his best to imitate the protocol of his predecessors, and then took his place behind a cushion. Ksariss, loathe to bow before any man, determined that she would play her role as the sorceress boldly. She entered the chamber and stood for a moment without bowing. She then moved with an air of great authority through the semicircle of advisors and stood silently studying the Emperor, her eyes, obscured by her veil, boring into his. She held his gaze for several minutes, and then stood at the right hand side of his throne.

Slightly unnerved by what Ksariss had done the Emperor scanned his advisors, seeking Trelane. He then glanced momentarily at Ksariss before asking of Trelane, "Is this she who will divine my future?"

"This is she of whom I spoke, Your Highness," said Trelane, very pleased with the gutsy entrance Ksariss had executed. "No greater power lives which can probe the mists of time to come."

"My gratitude," said the Emperor, bowing his head slightly toward Trelane. "You have petitioned for leave from the rest of these proceedings so that you might perform further service to me. Permission is granted."

"My gratitude to you, Your Highness," acknowledged Trelane, bowing low and then hurrying out of the meeting chamber.

The Emperor nodded to his most senior advisor who then lowered himself onto his cushion. As the rest of the advisors made themselves comfortable on their cushions the Emperor stood, facing them. When he had their attention he began speaking.

"We march to war because the rebellious Hezekiah has refused to pay his required tribute. By this, he refuses to give homage to his sovereign on the throne

of Assyria. He forsakes the path of peace, instead, fortifying his cities and preparing for war. He seeks an alliance with Egypt, hoping that together, he and Egypt will prevail against my armies. The throne of Assyria will not abide such effronteries. Those who question its authority will be severely punished. For this purpose of visiting retribution against my enemy, Hezekiah, I have decreed this campaign, bringing my armies firstly here, to this Judean city of Lachish, which now lies under our siege. I propose to take this city and use it as a base for further campaigns."

"Some of you, my loyal advisors, are asking why I chose to march first against Lachish instead of Hezekiah's capital city, Jerusalem. As you have seen, Lachish is not as heavily fortified as Jerusalem. Therefore, Lachish requires a smaller contingent of troops to contain the city and maintain a siege. I have deemed that the force now primarily assigned to the siege of Lachish will be sufficient to deal with any military threat that Hezekiah is brave enough to mount. As I read this insolent King, he is afraid to leave the walls of his city. He will remain there, intimidated and fearful, entirely on the defensive, waiting for us to move against him. Our army's presence here at Lachish, in addition to his own fears, will keep him at bay."

"Hezekiah will be counting on assistance from his unreliable neighbor, Egypt. The Egyptians are weak, incapable of raising an army strong enough to fight us alone and win. It is easy to see that Egypt badly needs Judah, and that Judah badly needs Egypt. It is my intention, simply, to keep the two apart. Therefore, those forces not already committed to keeping Hezekiah cowering in Jerusalem will march southward into Egypt. We shall conquer the land of the Nile, and then, with this prize under our control, Hezekiah will be left standing alone with only one intelligent choice: accede to our demands. After these events have come to pass, all of the world's trade will flow through lands controlled by Assyria. We shall levy extravagant duties on this vital commerce, and reign as the richest, most powerful empire in the known world. This is my inspired plan, my design for the empire I would leave to my successor. I have tried my best to enlighten you. Are there any points which yet remain unclear?"

None of the advisors uttered a word. The Emperor had laid before them his ambition, and his vision of how these things would come to be. At this point the Emperor's blueprint was almost law, except for a superstitious, self-imposed constraint. In support of a military gamble of this magnitude, His Highness required a reading; and for this he had summoned the

sorceress. If the gods were willing, through her the Emperor could look through the veil of time, through the present and into the future, and determine the appropriateness of his plan in their eyes.

"Very well, discussion is closed," stated the Emperor.

Ksariss felt a heavy, uncomfortable silence permeate the chamber as the eyes of every person, including those of the Emperor, turned toward her. Obviously she was expected to do something - but what? Somehow the weight of the dagger hidden in the folds of her gown, which had previously made her feel so bold, now seemed to offer no reassurance. You can't lose your grip now, she reminded herself. Don't panic!

"What would Your Highness ask of me now?" she inquired of Sennacherib.

"Why, the reading, of course, my lady," the emperor gently reminded.

Ksariss slowly looked at each of the advisors seated before the Emperor's throne. While looking at each man, she managed to search most of the chamber, discovering nothing which suggested it might be appropriately used for any kind of "reading". Maybe,

she reasoned, whatever she was supposed to “read” simply wasn't in the chamber yet.

“Bring the necessary items to me,” she directed, hoping very much to have something show up.

Sennacherib motioned to servants who had been waiting out of sight behind his throne. This initiated a hidden flurry of activity. One servant appeared carrying a long, ornate knife, its handle carved with symbols matching those on Ksariss' jewelry. The knife was borne in a folded piece of fine, rich red cloth.

Ksariss had placed her hands together in front of her face, attempting to appear as though she was in deep meditation. She stayed that way, deciding to ignore the servant, the knife, the Emperor, and everybody else in the chamber for the time being. If nothing else was brought to her, or if her audience became impatient expecting her to make the next move, then she would just have to come up with a next move. She mentally complimented herself for following this inspiration, for another round of bustling behind the throne preceded the entrance of three other servants, each one pulling a reluctant goat by a rope around its neck. The three servants stood before her, each maneuvering his respective goat to a position in front of himself, and watched, as if expecting her to choose the animal which suited her.

Following an impulse, she said, "That one," as she pointed to the goat on her right.

The servant bearing the knife presented it to the servant in charge of the chosen goat, who took the knife in the cloth, bowed to the Emperor, and then wrestled his tethered charge out of the meeting chamber. As the two unchosen goats were removed from the presence of the emperor, Ksariss went back into her façade of meditation and awaited the next development.

In a matter of minutes the caretaker of the chosen goat reentered the meeting chamber carrying a basket which was covered by the red cloth originally wrapped around the ornate knife. He placed the basket on the floor of the tent before Ksariss, bowed again to the Emperor, and then hastily retreated from the chamber.

Ksariss knelt before the basket and gingerly took hold of the corners of the red cloth. She folded the cloth back, and gave thanks for the protection her black veil afforded in keeping everyone from seeing the expression of surprise on her face. Where, Ksariss wondered, had Trelane ever encountered mystical rites this bizarre?

She forced herself to concentrate on the execution

of a slow, deliberate deep breath, for inside the basket were several freshly extracted animal organs presumably removed from the body of the chosen goat. Regrettably, Ksariss was not well versed in the anatomy of Terran quadrupeds, and was at a loss to identify the organic contents of the basket except for the heart which still beat erratically.

It appeared that she was expected to examine what had been placed in the basket. This would be consistent with some of the things she had learned about sometimes practiced mystical fortune-telling religious rites from Kohbrah's Earth history tape. Fortunately, the ornate knife which had been used to kill the goat and prepare the grisly potpourri had been left in the basket. Ksariss took it and began turning, probing, and pushing around the still-warm contents of the basket, all the while mumbling unhappily to herself about how stupid she had been for not demanding more information from Trelane about the expected reading. Vowing to avenge her present humiliation on Kirk, she put on a good show of analyzing the prophetic goat's entrails before placing the knife back into the basket and covering its contents with the red cloth.

When she looked toward the throne she easily found the eager eyes of Sennacherib. "O Mighty Ruler,

I have seen that you please the gods by bringing your armies to Judah and laying siege to the city of Lachish," she began, "for you have now divided the forces of Judah. But beware, O Sennacherib, for the gods have revealed that you misread Egypt. They forewarn you to hear their words: Egypt fears you more than does Judah. While Hezekiah invites war with Assyria, Egypt trembles at the very thought, and shrinks from opposing you. To reap success in this venture, O Sennacherib, you must turn away from the march to the south, and instead vanquish your enemy Hezekiah."

"One moment, my lady," interrupted the Emperor, "what does the future hold if I keep my own council, marching on Egypt as originally planned?"

"Doom, Your Highness!" stressed Ksariss. "To march on Egypt is to divide your own forces. Hezekiah will fight and destroy half your army at Lachish. When Egypt learns of his victory, it will find its courage, and such forces as they can muster will join Hezekiah in the Sinai to face your remaining half-army."

"The seer speaks wisely, Your Highness," shouted Kohbrah, springing eagerly to his feet. "I led a squad of scouts south into the Sinai. We scoured each dune, hill, and valley. Disguised as merchants, we rode for

days along the banks of the Nile and found no Egyptian army waiting to help Hezekiah."

Sennacherib looked from Kohbrah to the veiled face of Ksariss and back again. "The gods have spoken," he quietly admitted to himself. Then, in a stronger voice for all to hear, he decreed, "In light of these revelations a revised campaign strategy will be implemented. Those forces currently assigned to the siege of Lachish will continue attempts to take the city. All remaining troops will prepare to march at daybreak to the city of Hezekiah!"

* * *

Miriam led her group through Jerusalem's east gate where they, like everyone else, were detained by a squad of soldiers for another inspection. Spock had been keeping the hood of his garment close about his head, and had been avoiding prolonged eye contact with everyone. As the squad's inspectors closely examined the contents of each bag, one of them noticed that Spock seemed ill at ease and began to scrutinize him suspiciously.

As Kirk listened to Miriam answer the questions directed at her, he surmised that the squad leader was an acquaintance of Miriam's family. He had first discharged his official duty of the interview, probing for anything of importance which should be passed on to his superiors. With that formality out of the way their conversation had strayed to personal topics, from the whereabouts and status of mutual acquaintances to conditions within the city. As they continued talking the suspicious inspector continued eyeing Spock. The expression of uncertainty on his face transformed into one of determined conviction, and he left his station, sliding beside the squad leader and requesting a private moment to discuss his misgivings about the tall, hooded traveler.

The squad leader stepped aside, listening to the inspector's concerns. Kirk had been discreetly keeping an eye on this development, and he felt a growing concern as both soldiers began studying Spock. The squad leader thanked the inspector for his alertness, and sent him back to his station after promising to investigate the points brought to his attention.

Coming over to Miriam, the squad leader lowered his head and quietly said, "One of my men has questioned the wisdom of admitting your friends into

the city. I hope you won't take it personally, because they are under strict orders to report any suspicions refugees trying to pass through the gate. We cannot afford to admit any Assyrian sympathizers."

"These men are not Assyrian sympathizers!" Miriam discreetly assured. "In fact, they will be employed by Uncle Abram."

"Employed by your Uncle Abram?" the squad leader repeated. "Then they must be men of exceptional character."

"Believe me," smiled Miriam, "they are."

"Excellent," said the relieved squad leader. "As long as your uncle is vouching for everybody, we can let you all go on your way. He is probably anxious to know that you are safe."

Farewells were exchanged, and Miriam's group walked into the city. Everywhere there were soldiers and workers preparing for battle. All the windows in the buildings had shutters secured over them, and not a single door hung open. At this point it was impossible to guess whether the buildings' owners were more afraid of Assyrian soldiers breaching the city walls or of the hordes of refugees who wandered aimlessly through the streets, unsure of where to find

shelter, or even food, as most of the street vendors had already sold their precious rationed inventories and had left for the day.

They walked through a maze of seemingly featureless streets, passing many more completely shuttered quite ordinary buildings, until they encountered the wall. It was high and strong, made of blocks of stone which were tightly fitted, and it could have enclosed a great number of smaller buildings like those which existed around it.

What the wall actually enclosed was impossible to see from the street. As Kirk had slowed to examine it, he had fallen behind Miriam and Joash, who had actually walked more rapidly past the wall's single imposing, massive wooden gate, and the two stern military sentinels who flanked it. Out of loyalty, Spock had stayed near Kirk. A moment later the two of them ran to catch up with Miriam as she continued pulling Joash along with her. When Kirk had caught up with her, he looked back at the wall and asked, "Does someone important live inside that compound?"

"Not likely!" answered Miriam with a quick glance at Kirk. "Inside that wall is the most heavily guarded prison in the city."

Once out of sight of the prison's walls, Miriam

allowed their pace to slow to a more relaxed gait. As they continued walking they met fewer and fewer refugees, and the lots upon which buildings were situated became larger, often incorporating intricate landscaping and gardens to partially hide dwellings from viewers in the street.

Miriam stopped before a gate which barred their entrance to a thickly populated garden divided by a curved stone path ending at the door of someone who obviously derived a comfortable living from his occupation. Miriam called out a greeting several times. An elderly servant soon appeared behind the gate and began explaining to Miriam that the allegedly modest estate within the gardens was private property. Somewhat amused, Miriam interrupted him and attempted to identify herself, pointing out that the owner of the house was expecting her. The elderly servant responded with a look which inferred that he had long since passed his quota of surprises for the day, but he added that he would nevertheless, out of the goodness of his heart, fetch his master to decide what to do with her and her dusty associates. Shaking his head and muttering a string of comments which were blatantly unkind toward Assyrians and most of their ancestors for the ways they had upset his city's peaceful lifestyle, the servant shuffled up the path, under the overhanging budding branches of the

garden's trees, and then around the corner of the partially obscured house.

A moment later another older, grey-bearded man appeared under the shaded roof at the front entrance to the house and peered through the overhanging branches at the people outside the gate. "Uncle Abram!" shouted Miriam as she began waving. Joash stuck his arm through the bars of the gate and waved as he added, "Hi, Uncle Abram!"

"Miriam! Joash!" exclaimed the man as he began running down the garden path and calling to his servant, "Come quickly and open the gate. Let my niece and nephew enter!"

When the gate was opened, Abram, Miriam, and Joash converged into a grand, swirling hug. Kirk and Spock quietly entered the garden standing just inside the gate under the careful scrutiny of the elderly servant and hoping that they had not intruded too far before being invited. Eventually Uncle Abram noticed them and assumed a more formal, erect posture while keeping his arms around Miriam and Joash.

"Miriam, dear," Abram said, "I don't believe that you have introduced me to your, er, fellow travelers."

"Sorry, Uncle Abram," she smiled. "These men are

James, and Spock." She had indicated each with her open hand. Kirk and Abram clasped hands. Spock merely bowed.

"You'll learn that Spock is the quiet type," Miriam explained to her uncle, "and that some of his customs are different, but if you give things a little time you'll come to like him, and James, too, just as Joash and I have. Please invite them in, Uncle. Joash and I have a story to tell you, and then a favor to ask."

"Very well," Abram gave way to Miriam's wishes and his own curiosity. "Come, gentlemen, enter my humble home. All I can offer you at the present is a cool place to rest and some water. Almost everything else in the city, especially food, has been rationed, you understand."

"Thank you for your hospitality, Sir," responded Kirk. "A place to rest and some water would be most appreciated."

Kirk and Spock followed Uncle Abram, Miriam, and Joash along the stone path as they excitedly chattered, relating the tale of their journey to Jerusalem, and the previous night's adventure with the gang of thieves. As the stories progressed, they all entered a courtyard behind the house. There they rested while Miriam recounted how Kirk and Spock had come dashing

through the trees to disperse the gang of thieves.

"It seems that I am greatly indebted to you two men," Abram acknowledged at the conclusion of Miriam's story. "What can I possibly do to repay your kindness?"

"Uncle Abram," Miriam interrupted, "I hope you don't mind, but I kind of suggested that you might have some work for them."

"I see," said Abram, stroking his beard thoughtfully. He looked from Miriam and Joash to Kirk, and then to Spock. "You know," he said to Spock, "I'd feel much more comfortable with you if you could put down that hood."

"I do not wish to offend you in your own home, sir," Spock answered, "but it is necessary that I wear this garment in this manner."

"...because," Kirk added, "his ears can become cold very easily." And that's not totally untrue, Kirk rationalized, because a comfortable terran environment was nearly always colder than a normal Vulcan environment.

Abram decided to let the matter drop. After all, Miriam had warned him that the one named Spock

would be a little different. He was inclined to trust Miriam's assessment of the two strangers. He had learned over the years that he and Miriam nearly always formed the same opinions about the same people. After several additional minutes of studying the two men, he finally said, "As it so happens, I am in need of someone who can handle a position of responsibility. You see, my job is to oversee preparations for the defense of my assigned sector of the city. Often I must communicate with other sector overseers, and for this I must rely on dependable, trustworthy messengers to deliver my communications. Now, you might wonder why I would mention this to two strangers. As it so happens, my niece is usually a pretty good judge of character. You've convinced her that you can be trusted, and that you're dependable and loyal. And, I believe that you two work well as a team. I'm going to honor her request and offer you two this job. It won't place a lot of gold coins in your purses, but as long as Jerusalem stands you'll be safe and as well fed as well as any of the King's men."

"We'd be honored to accept," said Kirk, "wouldn't we, Spock?"

"Oh...yes, Sir. Most honored," Spock added.

"...and, I'm sure we can justify your trust in us," said

Kirk in an attempt to end their acceptances on a smooth note.

"So let it be," said Abram. "The first thing I must do is prepare letters of introduction for you. You will spend the day carrying them to the other sector overseers. That way they will learn that you are my personal representatives, and you will familiarize yourselves with the layout of the city."

Within the hour Kirk and Spock had been given their letters and a list of officials they would meet, and they had been briefed in detail about their duties and the locations of important sites in the city. Abram was anxious that they should be on their way to meet with all the other overseers before the end of the day.

The first meetings occurred without incident. Each of the overseers they met was cordial and helpful in providing directions to the headquarters of the next official on their list. Aided by Spock's exceptional memory, they made good progress in discharging their day's work as the shadows became longer in the streets.

Kirk looked toward the sky, noting that it was late afternoon. He checked the list he was carrying, counted the number of unvisited officials which remained, and mentally performed a simple

calculation.

"It's getting late," he observed. "I wonder if we'll get this all finished today."

"Only if we find some way to improve our travel efficiency," said Spock.

"Do you mean that we should find some shortcuts?" Kirk asked.

"It should be possible with the geographical knowledge of the city we have accumulated thus far," stated Spock.

"Alright," said Kirk as he stopped to look around, "we'll take a shortcut. Which one?"

Spock studied the street they were on, mentally estimating distances and gauging directions from the position of the sun in the sky. He pointed toward a narrow alley farther ahead of them on the right side of the street. "If I am correct," he said, "that narrow passageway should cut several minutes from our time to the next overseer's headquarters."

"Very well, Mr. Spock. The narrow passageway it shall be," Kirk frivolously announced as he stepped lightly toward Spock's indicated shortcut.

Spock hastened to rejoin Kirk, wishing to discuss something he had kept in the back of his mind since their placement on the planet's surface the previous night.

"Captain?"

"Yes, Spock?"

"I was curious to know if you had formulated a way to contact the ship."

"Not exactly," Kirk admitted, "but I have been thinking about it."

"If I may ask, what have your thoughts been?"

"That it may not be easy, without our communicators and using contemporary technology, to communicate with a spaceship that is somewhere, thousands of miles away in space."

"Then, you have not solved this problem."

"No, I haven't, Spock. Have you?"

"Regrettably, no."

"Well, don't take it too hard, Spock. We'll simply keep working on it."

They reached the alley and followed its narrow path as it snaked between the buildings on either side. Kirk stopped, smiling in the confining atmosphere of a walkway which would permit only two, or maybe three people, if they were small and very friendly, to pass through it side-by-side. He could see neither end of the alley. He searched the buildings, noting that the alley's doors and windows were all as tightly secured as any he had seen in the city. He studied the encroaching shadows, and realized that objects in the constrictive avenue were hued predominantly in shades of grey.

Then Kirk stopped suddenly because he was certain he had seen a dark human figure slinking into shadows cast by buildings they had already passed

"Be quiet," Kirk said with a finger at his lips. "I get the disquieting feeling that we're being followed."

Spock listened carefully for several seconds before whispering, "Yes, Captain, by at least two people."

They resumed walking, this time at a faster pace, listening for signs that they were being approached from the rear, and casting occasional glances at places they had just passed. Soon the brighter light of a major street loomed ahead of them. As they emerged from the shadows of the alley, four men who had been

leaning against the buildings at either side of the entrance dashed into the wider street and formed an obstructing semicircle in front of Kirk and Spock.

"Well, now," sneered one of the troublemakers, "if it isn't our two friends what likes to push their noses into other people's business!"

Kirk recognized the man speaking and two of the others as the thieves who had assailed Miriam and Joash the night before. Hearing footsteps to his rear, Kirk turned around to see the two followers from the alley blocking any possibility of retreat in that direction. By this point in the standoff each of the six men had armed himself with either a knife or a club.

On a signal from their leader the gang rushed at Kirk and Spock. Kirk kicked a knife from the hand of one and dropped another to the ground with a two-handed chop to the base of his neck. Spock thrust his right foot rearward into the stomach of his closest assailant and ducked under the swinging club of another. Like a cat, Spock maneuvered behind the man with the club and rendered him unconscious with a nerve pinch. Another assailant leaped frantically onto Spock's back. Spock tried unsuccessfully to shake him off, and then drove himself aggressively backward into the side of a building. The impact stunned the man on Spock's back. As he slid toward

the ground he tried half-heartedly to grab onto something, his fingers finding a secure enough grip on Spock's hood to pull it from his head.

The fight stopped immediately. One of the still-standing assailants screamed in terror, then pointed at Spock and shouted, "Demon!! Demon!!"

By this time the commotion of the street fight and the screaming about demons had attracted a noisy audience. There were scattered warning shouts from the outside of the crowd because a contingent of soldiers was hurrying to investigate the disturbance.

The gang leader stepped back from the affair and feverishly motioned for the soldiers to hurry to him.

"Look!" he said to the first soldiers to arrive as he pointed to Spock's pointed ears. "He's not human: he's a demon! And the other man," he said, pointing to Kirk, "I seen him traveling with the demon!"

The gang leader leaped at Kirk and pulled his robe away from him, revealing Kirk's Starfleet uniform. A brave member of the gang did the same to Spock. The gang leader shied back from Kirk, pretending to be in great fear as he pointed and cried, "Do you see? They are not of our city!" He dropped to his knees before one of the soldiers and pleaded, "Protect us! Do your

duty. Take them away from us, please!"

The rest of the crowd picked up on the gang leader's theme, raising a great tumult which echoed what he had started. Kirk and Spock found themselves surrounded by more soldiers and aroused civilians than they could ever hope to overpower. The gang of thieves, still in possession of the confiscated robes, gleefully disappeared into the alley, taking with them Kirk's and Spock's only slim hope for vindication, Abram's identifying letters of introduction.

Someone with a face hidden in an unnaturally dark hood appeared with lengths of strong cord, and Kirk and Spock were swiftly bound and being pulled through the street. A mob grew around them; a seething mass of people fighting to catch a glimpse of the demon. As they stumbled along, other troops pushed their way to the core of the mob to reinforce the contingent holding Kirk and Spock in custody. They became aware of objects being hurled into the mob. Judging from the putrefying odors which resulted from the bombardment, most of the objects were rotting food. Fortunately more and more soldiers were surrounding Kirk and Spock and were absorbing the brunt of the punishment from the over-ripe projectiles. With difficulty Kirk managed to catch

glimpses of the buildings they were passing, and the route being taken by the raucous parade became more and more familiar. They were being led down the same street they had walked that very morning with Miriam and Joash; the street which passed by the most heavily guarded prison in the city.

---- CHAPTER THIRTEEN ----

Once more Kirk slowly walked around the perimeter of the dark cell he shared with Spock. In his previous inspections, walking the same circuit, he had been unable to discover a single defect in the thick stone walls. The fitting of the individual stones seemed to be of the same high level of craftsmanship as the wall which bordered the prison complex.

A little while before, Kirk had tried digging into the cell's dirt floor by scooping the dirt aside with his hands. To his dismay the soil several centimeters below the surface had become too hard to be exhumed that way. In frustration he had just kicked his small pile of excavated dirt back into the hole he had made.

He came to the cell door which was made of solid, heavy wood, hinged and securely fastened from outside the cell. There were no windows to the outside in the walls, but through the small square barred opening in the door, Kirk could still see fading rays of dim natural light in the central corridor which divided two long rows of cells.

Kirk had been amazed with the facility with which he and Spock had been committed to their cell. One of the soldiers must have run ahead of the rabble swarming around the troops which were escorting them toward the prison and had forewarned the prison guards about the approach of the unruly crowd. As they had approached the gate in the outer prison wall Kirk had seen that it was already being opened for them. He and Spock, and several of the soldiers closest to them, had been squeezed through the partially opened gate while the remaining troops had deployed themselves to hold the angry crowd at bay while the heavy gate was secured against them. They had been roughly handed off to regular prison guards and whisked through a corridor of administrator's chambers, then through a heavy wooden door at the head of a longer, darker corridor, and finally rolled through another waiting open door into their cell. The ponderous, rank odor in the air had stung Kirk's eyes and had all but halted his

breathing. He had risen to his knees, blinking his eyes and holding his breath until it was no longer possible to refrain from inhaling. Spock, also on his knees, had closed his eyes tightly as he had struggled to maintain a semblance of self-control. As the guards in the corridor had guffawed and taunted, the cell door had been forced closed, the resulting echoing 'whump' in the darkness conjuring up a feeling of finality which Kirk had never fully understood until that moment.

Kirk had clenched both fists tightly while still kneeling on the floor and had sputtered, "Don't you...have...some other place...that smells... better?"

In response, a sweaty, leering, ugly face, its repulsive smile missing most of its teeth, had appeared at the opening in the cell door and had proclaimed, "You'll get used to it - if it's not already just like home for you and your demon friend!" There had been a chorus of rolling laughter in the corridor which had diminished in volume as the guards had left to attend to other duties.

That had happened, perhaps, two hours ago. The atmosphere in the cell still assaulted Kirk's olfactory senses like a poorly maintained barn, but he had, as the guard had predicted, become more used to it. Back inside the cell Kirk could see a shadow, which was Spock, sitting on the floor in a corner opposite the

door. His knees were slightly raised, supporting his elbows. He held his hands together at his forehead, his eyes closed, apparently deep in meditation.

Kirk walked to the center of the cell and stood with his hands on his hips. He looked around in the various directions he had looked dozens of times before. "Well, at least we're together," he said.

"Yes, apparently because of my resemblance to 'demons'," Spock answered a moment later. "Our captors must believe that I exercise a supernatural control over your mind. Perhaps they are hoping to localize any problems which I, or you and I together, might be able to create."

"Control...?" asked Kirk in feigned amazement, "over my mind? If you can control my mind, then explain how I was able to beat you at chess the last time we played. It couldn't have been more than a month ago."

"I remember the game," Spock replied, "twenty-seven days ago. Your illogical unpredictability does, at times, appear to give you something of an advantage."

"Yes, only twenty-seven days ago," Kirk started to agree, "give or take a few thousand years. I don't know about you, but I'm hungry. It's been a long time

since breakfast. I wonder when they feed us."

Kirk walked to the door and shouted through the bars in the window, "Hey, anybody, when do we get something to eat?"

A gruff, agitated voice from a cell across the corridor growled, "We get food and water twice a day if nobody makes a big fuss. So how about you keep things quiet over there, and don't ruin supper for the rest of us!"

Kirk shrugged his shoulders and stepped back from the door. The light in the corridor was nearly gone. As he watched the shadows merging into an encompassing blanket of darkness, he heard the corridor door being unlocked and opened. Two guards came through the door and into the corridor, each carrying two torches which they set into brackets mounted on the walls. The shimmering light provided by the torches performed an eerie dance with the more powerful shadows, and the resulting illumination was, at best, poor. The two guards opened a cell door on the other side of the corridor, and then entered the cell, only to drive two frail, elderly men ahead of them into the corridor. The two aged prisoners waited expectantly for a brusque command from the guards to accompany them before walking with them out through the corridor door. A

short time later the four men returned, the two guards prodding and driving the two elderly men before them with short clubs. One of the prisoners carried a basket of bread loaves, and the other a cask of water. At each cell door, one loaf of bread for each prisoner was tossed through the window. Water was rationed at one earthenware cup per prisoner. The cup was filled from the cask and passed through the window where a prisoner drank his ration and passed the cup back out to be filled with water for the other inmates in the cell.

When the guards arrived at Kirk's and Spock's cell, two meager loaves of bread were tossed through the barred window onto the dirt floor. A moment later a sweaty guard's face appeared at the window, sporting a cruel smile. "You scum are new here," he said as his eyes sought out the prisoners he was addressing. "There's rules, and they gets explained only once - so listen good! You gets your water passed in one cup at a time. Now this cup you'll be holding is everybody's cup, so you'll drink your water quick, and then pass the cup back out so's your partner gets his. Now, if you decides to play stupid games: like maybe you don't want to give back the cup, or you gets slippery fingers and drops the cup and breaks it, well then, we'll just let you spend the night with some new cellmates who will explain to you how much they

dislike having to wait 'till the next meal for their new cup. Most of our troublemakers learn real quick to be careful with everybody's cup."

With a final stubble-edged grin the guard moved away from the window, and their first cup of water was passed in. Kirk passed it to Spock who drank dispassionately before carefully handing the cup out through the bars.

When Kirk received the second cup he looked for a moment at the water it held. "I hope McCoy has been keeping our immunizations up to date," he muttered before lifting the cup to his lips.

"Dr. McCoy is, by nature, distressingly persistent about such things," Spock assured. "You have very little to be concerned about."

After finishing his turn with the water cup, Kirk joined Spock in carefully groping along the floor for the loaves of bread. Spock successfully located both loaves and handed one to Kirk. After brushing the worst of the dust off the outer crust, Kirk sampled his first tentative nibble. He judged the bread even more unappealing than the water. The batter had obviously contained as much grit as flour when it had been prepared, and whoever had baked the loaves hadn't wasted a lot of fuel in the ovens. Even so, they both

managed to force down their less than appealing meal.

"I'm going to make a special point to forego a tip when I check out of this dump," Kirk grumbled.

"Had I slightly more inclination to express emotion, I would wholeheartedly concur," added Spock.

When the meal rations had been distributed to each prisoner, and the elderly men had been kicked back into their cell, the two guards removed the torches from the wall brackets and extinguished them before securing the corridor door for the evening. Kirk could sense the darkness gloating over its easily won victory as he and Spock searched for the least uncomfortable position in which to bed down for the night. Sleep came easily to both men on their first night in Trelane's Jerusalem.

They awoke hungry and thirsty the next morning. Kirk looked out his cell door window and saw that the light through the corridor door window was bright, suggesting that the sun had been climbing in the sky for some time. Silently and patiently, Kirk and Spock waited for their morning rations. It became apparent that the guards were in no special hurry to attend to this humane chore. Kirk attempted to make good use

of the idle time by planning an escape and a way of signaling to his ship. Unfortunately, most of the schemes which he devised depended heavily upon having resources beyond his immediate ability to acquire. He wondered what McCoy could say if he was with them to keep their spirits up. In his mind Kirk enacted several uplifting dialogues with McCoy before pulling his thoughts back to extracting himself and Spock from the ironclad hopeless predicament into which they had fallen.

Finally Kirk heard the corridor door being unlocked. Two different, though no less cruel and unkempt guards slogged down the corridor and dragged the same two elderly men from their cell. Eventually they were made to follow the same routine, distributing food and water as they had the night before.

Between times of pressing the elderly men to work faster the two guards talked among themselves, unwittingly bringing news of interest from the outside to Kirk and Spock. Reverberating throughout the city was the story of mounted Hebrew scouts discovering a large force of Assyrian troops marching toward Jerusalem from the direction of Lachish. At the rate the Assyrians were traveling, they would reach the city by nightfall.

Kirk waited until the two guards had locked the corridor door before risking conversation with Spock. "Maybe coming into this city wasn't such a good idea after all," he said.

Spock chose to say nothing.

"I gather from your silence that we are in agreement," Kirk observed.

"If I was pressured into making a statement, I would have to agree with you," replied Spock.

"I'm not going to pressure you for any statements," said Kirk, "but I will ask for your assessment of our options."

"I see two options," Spock said. "Wait here where we are, where our future is uncertain and perilous, or, attempt an escape; however slim the chance of success."

"An escape?" Kirk questioned. Now he wished he had asked Spock about this sooner.

"Precisely," Spock answered. "There is a time which offers both the opportunity for escape and materials to be used in signaling to a ship overhead, assuming, of course, that a ship would be positioned overhead to receive such a signal."

"A signal?" asked Kirk, now very curious about what had been brewing in Spock's mind. "Explain, please."

"The time I am referring to is during the evening meal, when the guards return with the prisoners who pass out the rations," explained Spock. "There are only two guards. I have not determined how to persuade them to open our cell door, but if that could be accomplished, along with, of course, overpowering the guards, then we could utilize the torches which they hang in the corridor and the basket in which the bread loaves are carried to signal from some open place."

"Creating an intelligently changing light pattern - something like Morse Code," suggested Kirk.

"Possibly," said Spock, "but it is useless to settle upon a protocol for signaling if we cannot first determine how to reach a suitable place from which to signal."

"Don't be so quick to discard this," said Kirk hopefully. "Maybe there's a way we can make this work."

"I am not sure I completely understand, Captain."

"Tell me, Spock," said Kirk, developing a mischievous gleam in his eye, "do you think you could learn to act like a demon?"

* * *

The day had progressed into late afternoon. In the time which had passed since the morning meal Kirk and Spock had prepared, as well as they could, a plan for escape. Both were beginning to feel the effects of limited food and water, and both had agreed that their best chance for a successful escape lay in attempting it while they still had the strength and the will to pull it off.

In time, the outside light faded. As darkness again enveloped the corridor and the interiors of the cells the door at the head of the corridor was opened, and two different guards entered. This time one of the guards had brought the basket of loaves and the water with him, while the other had carried the torches. They placed the bread and the water inside the door, and then each of them took two of the torches. As they stood at the entrance to the corridor, they resumed a noisy argument which had begun before

their arrival at the corridor door.

"And I still don't see why you have to carry the prisoners' meal down here yourself," grumbled one guard. "We're supposed to use them two old thieves for that job!"

"I do it because I feel sorry for the two old men," returned the other. "They didn't do anything wrong. They were hungry, like most of the refugees in the city. They simply needed food."

"You got a twisted way of lookin' at things," accused the first guard. "Stealin' is stealin', and it's wrong because it's wrong, and that's the way the law says! You know, it wouldn't hurt you to spend more time listenin' to the law being read and learnin' some proper attitudes!"

"It doesn't really matter what 'attitudes' are being proclaimed," objected the second guard, "because the Assyrians outside our city walls are not going to strike their tents and run home because we all change our minds about which 'attitudes' to embrace! They're here to strip the gold from our city and scatter our people as far as they can, just like they did up north. And if you want my opinion, things don't look any better for us than it was for them!"

Murmuring to themselves, both guards stomped down the corridor, placing their torches in the wall brackets. As they returned, passing outside the cell door, Kirk gave Spock a pre-arranged signal.

"Insolent fool! You will come to me when I command it!" bellowed Spock in a deep voice.

"No! Let me alone, demon! Get out of my mind! I don't want to serve you anymore!" cried Kirk, holding out his hands as if protecting himself, and cringing deep in a corner where he could be seen through the window in the cell door.

"There is no reprieve! I have claimed you, and thus, you are mine to command forever!" Spock bellowed even louder.

"Here, here, you two!" shouted the first guard, looking in the window and beating on the cell door with his club.

Putting on his most intense expression of fear, Kirk screamed, "Get me out of here! Another cell! Just get me away from him!"

The second guard had joined his partner at the window. "You settle down in there, do you hear? You'll have this entire corridor in an uproar!"

Kirk let out an ear-piercing scream, and Spock, as he had reluctantly agreed to do, rushed toward Kirk's corner, roughly grabbed Kirk's shirt, and slapped him loudly across his face.

"Hey, hold it down over there. Yeah, get off each other, you two - we'd like our supper tonight!" came a flood of rebuke from other cells.

"Well, what are we gonna do with 'em?" cried the first guard in despair.

"You get in there and quiet them down," suggested the other. "If we lose control in here they'll throw us in with the prisoners, and then our lives won't be worth an empty purse!"

"Me, get in there?" protested the first guard. "With that demon?"

"Yes, get in there, while I quiet the rest of the cells!"

Kirk continued to cower and whimper, while Spock towered menacingly over him. Their cell door slowly opened. The first guard stepped cautiously inside with his club held tightly in his raised hand. Spinning around, Spock grabbed his elevated arm and twisted it behind his back, in the process causing him to drop his club before he was thrown toward Kirk. The second

guard charged into the cell and was met by Spock who efficiently directed his head against the rear stone wall of the cell. As he turned around, Spock saw Kirk standing over the unconscious form of his opponent.

Pointing to the unconscious guard at Spock's feet, Kirk commanded, "Get his knife!"

Kirk took the knife from the guard he had felled and cut the laces from the man's sandals. He used them to securely bind the man's arms behind him. Spock quickly performed the same procedure on his victim. Strips of cloth ripped from the guards' uniforms were then stuffed into their mouths to muffle any later cries for help. Then both Kirk and Spock inserted the guards' knives into their belts and cautiously stepped into the corridor.

While Kirk watched the doorway at the entrance to the corridor and emptied the basket of loaves onto the floor Spock ran to the end of the corridor and collected the four torches. As he returned with them, Kirk took a torch and ran to the cell which housed the two elderly men and opened their door.

"Your food and water are out here," he said, indicating the direction. "We'll leave you a lighted torch. All we ask for ourselves is a little bit of a head start. After we're gone, you're on your own."

Then he rejoined Spock, and they cautiously opened the corridor door and stepped into the larger outer corridor. Several doors to the right, the large corridor ended abruptly. The way out lay to the left, past a partially open door from which issued sounds of a group of men eating and talking.

Kirk whispered to Spock, "Walk by the door quickly, but not at a run. They'll see the torchlight, but maybe they'll think it's their friends returning from feeding the prisoners."

Spock nodded. Then, using the basket to hide their faces, they brazenly strolled past the partly open door. Several guards noticed the light of the torches passing by, and a few cursory glances were cast belatedly at the door, but none of them saw the fleeing figures clearly enough to guess that anything was amiss.

Once past the roomful of guards, they moved faster, finally ducking into a room at the darker other end of the corridor. This room proved to have a window which opened to a small courtyard. Crawling through the window, Kirk and Spock discovered a tree growing next to the courtyard wall which provided easy access to the roof of the prison building. Burdened with the large basket and the three lighted torches, they managed to climb to the roof without dropping anything. Placing a finger at his lips, Kirk

lowered himself and placed his ear upon the roof, listening for signs that a part of the building below them might be occupied. To his relief, everything was quiet.

"Captain," whispered Spock.

"Yes, Spock?"

"I am curious to know if you have given any thought as to how we are to escape from this prison compound."

"Sorry, Spock. I don't have a set plan. If signaling for a while doesn't produce the desired results, then we'll just have to find a way to get outside the walls. I'd say the only place we can be sure of finding shelter would be Abram's house."

Spock stared into the cool night breeze and observed, "Ours is a very haphazardly constructed plan."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. I knew you'd approve," quipped Kirk as he examined the basket they had appropriated. He discovered that it was woven tightly enough to keep light from escaping when the torches were placed inside. Kirk handed the basket to Spock who held it up-side-down while Kirk positioned the

torches.

"Have you decided what message you will send?" asked Spock.

"Yes," Kirk answered, "something simple that should be easy to identify with us."

Kirk started a repeating sequence of patterns, alternately hiding, and then exposing the light of the torches for long and short intervals of time.

Long - short.

Long - short - long - short.

Long - short - long - short.

Short - long - long - long - long.

Long - long - short - short - short.

Long - long - long - long - long.

Short - long - long - long - long.

* * *

From the Enterprise's command chair, Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott focused his full attention on the image of the Romulan warship hovering on the viewscreen. They were in orbit over the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the nighttime display on the viewscreen showing nothing out of the ordinary. The Romulans were still quiet. Suspiciously quiet, showing no signs of having reactivated their warp-drive systems. They had neither initiated communications nor acknowledged hails. The only activity detected by the Enterprise's sensors had been infrequent attempts to scan the surface of the planet below. The Enterprise, on the other hand, had constantly been scanning the planet, searching for any sign of Kirk and Spock, or any Romulans which they feared Trelane might have placed on the planet.

Except for the successful repairs to the ship, Lt. Commander Scott worried that their situation was not improving. The runaway planet, Mars, continued to close on the Earth. Engineers had been trying to formulate a way of dealing with the situation, but their proposed solutions, by their own admissions, were far-fetched and unworkable. Even worse than the engineers' solutions had been a suggestion from Ensign Sabat which had sounded like a candidate for top prize in the category of creative lunacy. When he had mentioned it, it had gotten a few laughs, but he

had apparently intended it to be taken seriously. If Kirk and Spock were not soon found, Scott's options would be reduced to either attempting to do something about the impending collision, or just getting safely out of the way. Whatever course of action they would decide to pursue, Scott hoped that they could later attempt to return to their own time. If Earth should be destroyed, he wondered what kind of altered universe they would discover, and what role his crew would be able to play in it. He also wondered what role the nearby Romulans would be playing in anything he decided to do.

"Mr. Scott, our scanners have detected a peculiar light emission from the surface," announced Lt. Uhura, breaking Scott's concentration. "There are definite fluctuations in its intensity. It's almost as if the fluctuations fall into a pattern."

Let's see it on screen, Lieutenant," ordered Scott.

At standard magnification there was no sign of a fluctuating light emission. "Increase magnification, Lieutenant," Scott ordered.

Uhura stepped through several stronger magnification grades before Scott interjected, "Hold it there, Lieutenant. I see what you mean."

Guided by information from the sensors, the viewscreen display had focused upon a city which the display computers had identified as Jerusalem. Ringing the city were countless flickering lights which appeared to have been the handiwork of a large group of armed men camped around the city. The city itself was completely dark, save for one faint intermittently flashing light source inside the walls; long durations of light, and short.

Lt. Sulu, seated beside Ensign Chekov at the navigation/helm console, observed, "That reminds me of the old earth Morse Code."

"I believe you're right, Mr. Sulu," Scott agreed. Turning to Uhura, he asked, "Lieutenant, are you getting this down?"

Already busily scribbling notes into her log entry, Uhura affirmed, "Yes, Sir, I am copying this down. The message begins: long-short; an 'N'. Long-short-long-short; a 'C'. Another 'C'. Now a 'one'. A 'seven'. A 'zero'. And another 'one'. Message ends. Mr. Scott, the message spells out our Starfleet registration code, NCC-1701!"

"I know, Lieutenant!" beamed Scott. "Who but Captain Kirk would think to identify himself like that?" From the arm of the command chair Scott opened a

channel. "Bridge to security. Assemble an armed security landing party and have them await my final instructions in the transporter room. Also, contact Mr. Sabat and Mr. Kramer. Inform them that they will accompany the landing party."

* * *

Kirk continued inserting and withdrawing the torches from under the basket, doggedly creating the message 'NCC1701'. He and Spock had both agreed to 'transmit' (it was the closest word they could think of for describing the process and purpose for creating the message) for approximately an hour before attempting the next phase of their escape from the prison complex. Trans-mitting for that length of time would insure that an orbiting ship would have ample opportunity to detect the message - that is, if it was inclined to be searching for them. After an estimated fifteen minutes of repeating the message Kirk's arms were tired, and he was on the verge of asking Spock to

trade places for a while. Suddenly there was activity in the courtyard below.

"I see it! Over here! Up on the roof!"

"You two, bring ladders! One up there - the other down there! Climb up quickly and try to outflank whoever's up there! You, you, and you, climb up this tree! Stop those spies from signaling to the Assyrians! Hurry!"

Ladders were brought and quickly placed against the courtyard's inner walls. Guards clambered onto the roof in three different places, surrounding Kirk and Spock, and drawing their swords.

Kirk and Spock were quickly disarmed and closely watched as they descended a ladder into the courtyard. Once standing on the ground, they were securely bound and then hauled unceremoniously toward the opposite side of the courtyard.

The Enterprise landing party materialized on the prison roof next to the spot where Kirk and Spock had been only minutes before signaling with the basket and torches. Sabat was holding his cat, Isis, who emitted a single loud yowl and leaped off the roof into the courtyard and then raced across it toward the guards surrounding Kirk and Spock. Sabat lowered

himself over the edge of the roof, dropped the rest of the way to the ground, and sprinted after Isis.

Responding to an obvious and sudden agitation among their captors and the familiar sound of a transporter beam-down, Spock, though bound, threw himself bodily against the nearest guard, smashing him to the ground. Kirk, also bound, tackled a guard who was now dealing with Isis clawing at his legs. Amid this newly roiling mass of confusion the rest of the landing party arrived to leave any remaining prison guards stunned by their phasers. Kirk and Spock were dragged to their feet and their bonds were removed and cast aside. Isis howled and jumped into the arms of Sabat. He spoke into his communicator, "Mr. Scott, mission accomplished. Seven to beam up."

---- CHAPTER FORTEEN ----

Seven sparkling patterns began to form on the Enterprise's transporter pads as Lt. Commander Scott nervously monitored the reintegration processes. The patterns solidified, and Scott verified that the entire

landing party had returned, along with, thankfully, Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock.

Kirk was the first person to step down from the platform. He was met by Scott who grabbed his hand and pumped it with joyful abandon, all the while beaming a wide, relieved smile. "It's good to have you back, Captain," Scott exclaimed, "and you, too, Mr. Spock!"

"It's good to be back, Scotty," Kirk responded. "Now, bring us up to date..."

Nostrils flaring, Scott stepped back in disbelief, having finally become aware of the disagreeable prison odor which still hung around Kirk. "Before or after a change of uniform, Sir?" he inquired.

Before Kirk could answer the Enterprise was rocked by a shuddering explosion. The sudden lurching of the ship left no one standing in the transporter room. Kirk forced himself back onto his feet and was staggering toward the wall intercom when Lt. Uhura announced from the bridge, "Mr. Scott, report to the bridge immediately! The ship is under Romulan attack!"

Having reached the wall, Kirk pressed the intercom button with the edge of his fist. "This is the Captain,

Lieutenant. Shields up! Bring us to red alert and defend my ship! We'll be on the bridge as soon as we can."

"Shields are up, Sir," Uhura reported. "I took the liberty..."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," interrupted Kirk. He looked for the people in the transporter room. Thankfully, none of them were seriously hurt. They were all up and moving, Scotty having just bolted out the door toward engineering. "We're on our way," he added before leaving the intercom panel.

There were no further attacks during the time in transit to the bridge. When the bridge turbolift doors opened, Kirk headed for the command chair. Spock, as quickly, slid into his chair at the science station.

"Report, Lieutenant. What happened?" said Kirk to Uhura.

"It all happened so quickly," said Uhura, her eyes darting between Kirk and the empty display on the viewscreen. "Right after your beam-up I finally detected warp power readings from the damaged Romulan ship. They must have just finished repairs and started charging their weapons. I tried to raise the shields, but we were fired upon before they were

fully energized. The Romulans fired two quick shots. We've lost the use of our photon torpedo launchers, phasers, and maneuvering. Engineering says we'll have maneuvering and maybe a photon torpedo launcher soon."

"Where's the Romulan ship?" Kirk demanded.

"After firing on us, it cloaked itself and disappeared," Uhura added.

Kirk rubbed his hands across his face and murmured to himself, "Scotty, give me something to work with, before our friends come back to finish the job."

"Captain," interrupted Uhura, "the Romulan ship is beginning to de-cloak ahead of us."

The wavering lines of the Romulan warship stabilized on the viewscreen before it fired its disruptors at the Enterprise. The viewscreen dimmed in anticipation of an impact with the bolts of energy, and then they struck the forward shields. Again the ship rocked, and crewmembers grabbed frantically for anything that would help keep them on their feet. Lighting dimmed as the shields commandeered power to dissipate the imparted energy.

"Forward shields are down to seventy percent," Spock reported.

On the viewscreen, the Talon gracefully banked to the right and veered off, its cloaking device again shrouding it in an invisibility field.

"Scotty, can you do something to boost the forward shields?" Kirk inquired urgently.

"Captain, at the moment I've got all my technicians working on something. You'll have to give me a few more minutes."

"That may be more time than we'll have. All speed, Mr. Scott," encouraged Kirk.

"Captain, the Romulan ship is decloaking astern," reported Uhura.

"All available power to the rear shields," ordered Kirk.

The Romulan ship fired its disruptors again. The Enterprise's rear shields held under the punishment.

"Captain, Mr. Scott reports that forward shields are up to full capacity," reported Spock.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk acknowledged. "Give

me normal power spread to the shield array."

"Scott here, Captain. You've got full maneuvering."

"The Romulan ship has de-cloaked above us, Captain. We are locked into all its weapons systems."

"Bring us hard to port, Mr. Sulu!" ordered Kirk.

Sulu started the Enterprise into a maximum effort left turn just as the Talon unleashed another volley of disruptor fire which was followed by the launching of a cluster of Romulan photon torpedoes. Sulu's reflexes proved a hair quicker than those of the Romulan armaments officer as the Romulan disruptor fire narrowly missed the outer edge of the Enterprise's starboard saucer shield and continued downward, slicing effortlessly through the cold upper layers of the Earth's atmosphere, dispersing slightly in the denser lower altitudes, and finally impacting violently on the planet's surface. Seconds later this impact site was additionally pummeled by the cluster of photon torpedoes, which had also missed their intended target.

"There have been Romulan disruptor and photon torpedo strikes on the planet's surface," reported Spock, confirming what had been displayed on the forward viewscreen.

Kirk spun the command chair around to face the science station. "Magnify the impact area," he ordered.

"The Romulan volleys impacted outside the city where we were imprisoned, mostly in areas occupied by the invading Assyrian forces," related Spock as he programmed the viewscreen to display the damage below. The impact areas, displayed in a night vision mode, showed widespread damage and the still bodies of Assyrian soldiers who had been fatally burned where they had stood. At the moment it was not possible to assess the exact extent of damages, but Kirk's rough estimates suggested that the number of casualties would be high enough to cripple the Assyrian force's ability to maintain their siege.

"Scott here, Captain. We have one photon torpedo launcher repaired. We're awaiting your order to energize and load."

"Well done, Mr. Scott!" enthused Kirk. Now the odds were much less against them. "Load one photon torpedo. Target it toward something incapacitating, but not fatal. Then stand by for my order to energize the automated launch system. Mr. Sulu, drop all shields. Lt. Uhura, stand by for any incoming communications."

In seconds the Enterprise was floating alone in orbit with its weapons and defenses apparently out of commission. For several minutes nothing happened, and then the Romulan warship Talon de-cloaked facing the Enterprise.

"All Romulan weapons are now locked onto us, Captain. Their shields are also down, and their transporter circuits are activated," reported Spock.

With his full attention on the viewscreen, Kirk calmly said, "Everybody, stand by, and be on the alert for boarders."

"Captain, we are being hailed by Subcommander Tarsus, the ship's acting Commander," said Uhura.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

"Kirk? The Federation's famous Captain James Kirk?" Quite pleased with the apparent outcome of his first combat command, Subcommander Tarsus dominated the viewscreen. "Why have you not fired upon me, Captain Kirk? Problems with your weapons systems, perhaps, as well as with your defensive shields? Are you ready to yield your ship? My terms are quite simple: unconditional surrender."

"No, Subcommander Tarsus, I am not yielding my

ship," said Kirk, "and I have not fired upon you yet because I wanted to give you an opportunity to agree to a cease-fire. Unconditionally, of course."

Momentarily taken aback by Kirk's offer, Tarsus at last managed a nervous laugh. "A cease-fire? When I have you helpless?"

"If I am reading you correctly, you are declining my offer," observed Kirk.

Tarsus laughed again, this time with more conviction. "Yes, Captain Kirk, I decline your offer, because my terms better reflect the balance of power between us."

"Mr. Scott..."

"Aye, Captain."

"Mr. Scott, activate your systems."

"Systems on line, Captain."

"Fire, Mr. Chekov! Raise the shields, Mr. Sulu."

A solitary photon torpedo sped toward the Romulan ship, covering the distance in seconds before detonating on the Talon's unshielded hull and leaving a gaping hole next to an area known to carry control

circuitry for its propulsion systems.

"Damage assessment, Mr. Spock," requested Kirk.

"The Romulan ship's propulsion systems are inoperable, Captain. They still maintain full life support capability, and for the moment they retain sufficient momentum to sustain orbit, however, due to several degrees of atmospheric drag, theirs is an orbit which will inevitably decay. Without repairs to their propulsion systems, their ship will eventually burn and disintegrate in the atmosphere."

"Did you hear that, Subcommander Tarsus?" asked Kirk of the no longer gloating figure on the viewscreen.

"Are you going to finish us off, or just watch us die a slow death?" asked Tarsus bitterly.

"Neither," said Kirk. "Again I extend an offer of a cease-fire between our two ships. I also offer any help, in friendship, that we might be able to provide."

"Why, Kirk?"

"The fighting between us must stop, and the rivalries between our governments must be put aside," said Kirk, "because they have no place in this time period. Your ship and mine have been brought

here by a being who entertains himself by playing war games in which we are being used as his live toy soldiers."

Kirk stopped talking, because Tarsus appeared to be in deep thought, possibly thinking seriously about what Kirk had said. He let the Romulan stew on his thoughts for several minutes and then decided to extend the olive branch another time.

"Subcommander Tarsus," he began, "I extend an invitation to you. Beam over to our Enterprise. We will share everything we know about how and why we were brought here. We can work together to devise a plan to put an end to this situation and return to our own time."

"And what of Commander Kohbrah and Ambassador Ksariss who were abducted from this ship?" asked Tarsus.

"We suspect that they are on the surface of the planet, not far from where my first officer and I were placed," Kirk replied. "Their retrieval is imperative before we attempt to leave."

"Who will carry the Ambassador back to our own time, if this is, indeed, possible?" asked Tarsus.

"If it will guarantee your cooperation, I will agree to your carrying the Ambassador back," offered Kirk.

"Thank you, Captain Kirk. Commander Kohbrah has said that it is important to know when your opponent is telling the truth. My instincts say that you are, so I shall accept your invitation to visit your Enterprise. There is a great deal to discuss."

"We'll be pleased to have you," said Kirk. "If you will relay the necessary coordinates to our Chief Engineer, we can beam you over at your convenience."

"Thank you, Captain Kirk. I shall contact your Chief Engineer shortly. I'd like to see our repairs initiated first."

Good, thought Kirk. I can use those few minutes to do something about this uniform, and maybe work in a quick bite or two to eat.

Turning the command chair again toward the science station he said, "Mr. Spock, we've had a rough couple of days down there. Let's freshen up before our guest arrives."

As they entered the bridge turbolift, Sulu stood and asked, "Sir, shall I arrange for a security detachment in the transporter room?"

Kirk thought, and then said to Sulu, "I appreciate the thought, but perhaps not. I'm hoping such measures won't be needed."

Kirk hurried to his quarters and ditched his offensive uniform in the recycling chute, and then spent a few rejuvenating minutes in the sonic shower. Stepping out, he ordered something light from the food synthesizer, and was stepping into a clean uniform when he heard the warble of the doorbell.

Making final adjustments to his shirt, he called, "Come in."

The door hissed open and admitted Lt. Commander Scott. "Captain," he opened, "I know that you're tired and hungry, and that things have piling up on you very fast, but I need a few minutes to inform you about something important."

"I've always got time for something important, Scotty," Kirk reassured as he pulled on his boots. "What is it?"

"It's about Ensign Sabat, Sir."

"Are you having problems with him?"

"Oh, no, Sir. No problems at all. It's just that he's..." Scott searched for appropriate words. "...he's more

than he seems to be."

"In what way, Scotty?"

"Well, Sir, you've met him before...in 1968, when he used the name Gary Seven."

Kirk stared. Scott appeared to be wholeheartedly sincere. Well, now that the connection had been made, he had to admit that it just could be so. Sabat had looked so very familiar on the bridge.

"Did he reveal why he's on the ship?" asked Kirk.

"Only to say that he's been sent to 'discourage' the occurrence of the collision between Mars and the Earth. The only problem is that he has to accomplish it with the resources we have to offer."

"Don't sound so depressed, Mr. Scott," Kirk smiled. "We have an ally who may just show us some interesting ways to utilize the resources we have at hand. I'd like to talk with him, but I'm expecting a Romulan visitor shortly, and I'd like you to handle the transporter controls."

"As you wish, Sir. I'll go there now and check the system over. One final thing, though. Our ally wants to continue to be addressed as Ensign Sabat."

"I'll try to remember that. Thanks for telling me, Scotty. I'll meet you shortly in the transporter room."

A short time later a refreshed Kirk waited in the transporter room with Lt. Commander Scott to greet Subcommander Tarsus as he stepped off the transporter platform. "On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, welcome aboard the Enterprise, Subcommander Tarsus," Kirk said as he offered his hand. Directing the Romulan's attention to the man at the transporter controls, he said, "This is Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, who handled your beaming over."

Tarsus and Scott nodded to each other. Kirk then motioned toward the open door of the transporter room. "This way, Subcommander. We will have our discussions in the ship's briefing room."

"One moment, Captain Kirk," Tarsus said, obviously puzzled. "There is something which I do not understand."

"What is that?" asked Kirk.

"We are alone," stated Tarsus.

"Because no one else was required to beam you over," Kirk explained.

"No, I mean we are alone in here. No guards. No armed security."

"I didn't feel that was necessary," said Kirk.

"I see," said Tarsus as private thoughts churned in his mind. A moment later he smiled, "I thank you for your hospitality, Captain."

"You're welcome. We really should move along to the briefing room and get on with our business. Mr. Scott, I would appreciate your accompanying us. If there is any assistance we can offer to the Talon, you'll be in charge of it."

"Aye, Captain," responded Scott as he fell into step with Kirk and Tarsus.

As they walked to the briefing room they discussed what would be needed to repair the battle damage suffered by the Talon. When assured that the Talon's crew could manage its own repairs Scott left for engineering.

In the briefing room Kirk and Tarsus met Spock, and Ensigns Sabat and Kramer, who had been invited to attend as special advisors. Together, Kirk and Spock related the account of the Enterprise's first meeting with Trelane, his fascination with Earth's

history, particularly its military history, and their assessments of his character and capabilities. Their presentation continued with Spock's theory of how Trelane had discovered the writings of Dr. Immanuel Velikovsky, and how he could have used a portion of those writings as the basis for the situation in which both ships were playing a part.

"Do you mean the destruction of your planet, along with you, Mr. Spock, Commander Kohbrah, and Ambassador Ksariss on the planet as it happens is all part of some child's game?" asked Tarsus. "Why have Commander Kohbrah and Ambassador Ksariss become victims of his revenge?"

"At this point we don't have all the answers," admitted Kirk, "but I am certain that somehow Commander Kohbrah and Ambassador Ksariss have been incorporated into Trelane's avenging fantasy. In Trelane's eyes we are no more than insects that he traps in a glass jar. He will shake the jar occasionally to stir us up and see what we will do. I regard him as immature enough to impulsively toss our glass jar into a fire for the thrill of watching us squirm and suffer."

Tarsus smiled. "The child should take care," he said. "Some insects carry a sting."

"So far our 'stings' have had little effect upon the

child," Spock noted. His statement had a sobering effect on Tarsus.

"Where is the child, Trelane, now?" asked Tarsus.

"We don't know," Kirk admitted. "Our last contact with him was two days ago. Although he could reappear at any time, I am not willing to sit around here on my hands being afraid that he might show up again."

"And what do you propose to do, Captain Kirk?"

"I have a little time left to search for your Commander and the Ambassador," said Kirk. "If I cannot find them in that time, I will have to address the problem of the planetary collision facing my home world. I understand that some of my people have been working up options for that effort."

"How will you know where to look for Commander Kohbrah and Ambassador Ksariss?"

"Spock and I believe that as we were placed in the Hebrew camp, your people were placed with the Assyrians, who make up the opposing army in this military scenario," said Kirk. "When we evaded your weapons fire, it impacted on the surface of the planet where the Assyrian army was camped resulting in

many casualties. While it is still dark down there, we would like to send a landing party down to the impact site to search through the casualties. If they are not among the casualties, then it is likely they would be with the retreating survivors."

Uncomfortably, Tarsus wrestled with something he had to ask. "Captain, are you not angry that I have hurt so many people on your planet?"

Kirk studied Tarsus for a moment as he prepared an answer. "Let me say that I feel compassion for all those who have suffered because of this incident," he said, "but in reality, some ancient historical accounts relate that an Assyrian army was mysteriously destroyed outside the city below at this time in our history. It seems likely that what has happened has kept the original time line intact."

"Nevertheless, I apologize for having caused their suffering," said Tarsus.

A moment of silence between Kirk and Tarsus reflected a new level of mutual respect and understanding.

"As I was saying," Kirk said in bringing the conversation back on course, "it is imperative that we search the impact site before daybreak."

"It seems like very long odds against success," Tarsus pointed out.

"True," Kirk agreed, "but those odds aren't going to get any better if we wait. I am ready to assign personnel to the landing party. Would you care to accompany us?"

"I would indeed. Thank you, Captain Kirk."

* * *

Kirk, McCoy, Tarsus, Kramer, and Sabat were beamed from the Enterprise's transporter room into an area of widespread devastation. Burned bodies, charred vegetation, and melted or disfigured hardware and weaponry were literally everywhere, and columns of smoke still rose from remaining hot spots. Each member of the landing party needed several minutes to take in and adjust to the sobering sights around them.

"Captain," said Ensign Kramer, "if we are going to stay and look around, we should get busy. Daybreak will come soon, and when the people in the city see there is nothing to fear, they'll come out here..."

"Yes, thank you for pointing that out, Ensign," acknowledged Kirk. "Let's quickly split up, keeping in visual contact with each other, and try to find some clues to the Romulans' whereabouts."

The five members of the landing party fanned out, examining bodies and hardware for any sign of a Romulan presence. As Sabat stepped over a human form, it groaned. He stepped back and kneeled beside it, discovering that it was an Assyrian soldier, still alive, though badly burned over most of his body. His face distorted in pain, he shivered in the cold night air.

"Captain, over here!" he called hoarsely to Kirk, who was nearby.

Kirk hurried to Sabat, who was still kneeling beside the dying Assyrian soldier and covering him with pieces of unburned cloth which he had sanitized by sweeping the fabric with his hand phaser at its lowest setting.

Kirk pulled his communicator from his belt and flipped it open. "Dr. McCoy, this is Kirk. Come over here right away."

McCoy and the rest of the landing party quickly gathered around Kirk and Sabat. McCoy carefully lifted the garments covering the Assyrian and

examined his injuries. Grave concern covered his face as he scanned the man's entire body with his medical tricorder.

McCoy stood and walked several steps away from the dying man. Kirk joined him to hear his report. "The man is in extreme shock," he said to Kirk. "Substantial third degree burns, and massive tissue destruction. Most of his internal organs are on the verge of shutdown. It's more a curse than a miracle that he's still alive! All I can do for him is to try to make him more comfortable, until..."

"Alright, Bones, do what you can for him," said Kirk, "but try to keep him conscious and with us for a little while longer. We'll need to ask him some questions."

McCoy prepared a hypo of powerful pain-relieving medication, and as he administered it he conceded that under the circumstances he was doing all that he could for the dying man. The Assyrian's moaning gradually subsided as the medication worked its way through his body. He lay quietly, blinking his eyes, trying to understand what was happening to him, and staring into a sky tinged with the dark oranges of a coming sunrise.

Kirk knelt beside him. "Can you understand me?" he asked.

The Assyrian's eyes slowly turned from the sky to Kirk's face. He nodded weakly, indicating that he understood.

"What happened here?" asked Kirk.

"Strange lights...in the sky," the Assyrian gasped. Fear and pain returned to his eyes as he relived the devastating rain of destruction from above.

"Suddenly...great light fell upon us. There was...fire...everywhere. No escape. I was on fire. Running from fire...into more fire. At last...I fell."

"Did you see anything after the fires started?" Kirk asked, trying to overlook the ghastly expressions on the face of the dying Assyrian..

"Yes...the Emperor...in his chariot. I heard...he said...most of his army...burned and dying. Must leave...quickly...before...people from the city...discover what has happened."

"Were there any foreigners with your Emperor?" asked Tarsus.

The Assyrian looked at Tarsus, puzzled by his pointed ears, and noting the difference in skin tone between Tarsus and Kirk.

Looking toward Kirk, he rasped, "Yes...there were

foreigners." Then he shifted his eyes to Tarsus, and attempting to compensate for his increasing difficulty in concentrating and speaking, he said, "The sorceress...the bodyguard...faces like yours. I...do not know...your people...or your homeland."

"Not many of his people ever travel this far," explained Kirk. "Tell me, where were your Emperor and the sorceress planning to go?"

After several unsuccessful attempts, the Assyrian managed to whisper, "Lachish...gather...army. Flee...to home. Afraid...of Hezekiah...afraid of...Egyptians."

"That should be all we need," said Kirk as he stood. "Let's prepare to beam up."

Everyone except McCoy slowly stood up and shuffled into positions behind Kirk. McCoy remained by the side of the Assyrian, doing nothing, yet finding it virtually impossible to leave him alone.

Kirk quietly walked to McCoy and kneeled beside him. Carefully placing a hand on McCoy's shoulder, he whispered, "Bones, we have to go."

"I should stay, Jim. I can't help him, but..."

"You know we can't risk leaving you behind, Bones," asserted Kirk.

McCoy said nothing.

"How long yet?" asked Kirk.

"Perhaps, sometime before the medication wears off," replied McCoy.

Kirk looked into the sky, gauging how little of the safety and concealment of nighttime was left. "Bones, it's almost dawn..."

McCoy reached into his medical pouch and withdrew a small container. From it he extracted a capsule which he held up for the Assyrian to see. "Eat this if the pain returns," he instructed. "It will help for a while."

The Assyrian weakly looked to McCoy and reached for his hand, accepting the capsule. Then his eyes glazed and his hand slipped to the ground, the capsule rolling into the dirt. McCoy reverently pulled the topmost cover over the Assyrian's head and reached over him to retrieve the capsule.

"I guess we can't afford to let this lie around," he grumbled bitterly."

---- CHAPTER FIFTEEN ----

The landing party beamed back aboard the Enterprise. As its members stepped down from the transporter pads Kirk went to the transporter control console and opened a channel to the bridge asking to speak with Lt. Uhura.

"Yes, Captain," she answered.

"Lieutenant, I want you to start scanning the terrain between the cities of Jerusalem and Lachish," directed Kirk. "You'll find the latter city about sixty kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. My guess is that the surviving Assyrians will try to regroup their remaining forces there to plan their next move. Track, and if possible, identify anybody traveling toward Lachish, with special emphasis on groups of Assyrian military personnel or Romulan life signs."

"Aye, Sir," Uhura responded. "Scanning procedures are being initiated."

Turning to Tarsus, Kirk said, "I have every confidence that we will locate Commander Kobrah and Ambassador Ksariss. My greatest concern is retrieving them quickly and with a minimum of commotion. If we cannot find them completely isolated and beam them up, it will probably be better

to wait until dark before going after them."

Tarsus grinned. "That is true. I want to thank you for a most enlightening experience, Captain Kirk. Now I must ask that you beam me back to my ship. I am anxious to check on the progress of its repairs."

"Of course," said Kirk. "If there is any way we can assist, let us know."

With a nod of acknowledgement, Tarsus returned to the transporter platform and was beamed to the Talon. Kirk went to his quarters, his mind focusing on the mountain of reports which would have to be prepared and filed with Starfleet Command if and when they were able to return to the galactic order they had left behind. As he walked through the door he heard Lt. Uhura summoning him from the bridge.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" he responded over the intercom before sitting on his bunk.

"To bring you up to date, Sir, we are monitoring several groups of Assyrian survivors traveling toward Lachish. It appears that scouts or messengers have ridden ahead of some of the larger groups. So far we haven't detected any Romulan life signs among the survivors."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Kirk. "Can you give me some estimate of how large a force the Assyrians will have when the survivors arrive at Lachish?"

"Yes, Sir," Uhura answered. "Many of the survivors are injured, so they should not significantly strengthen the Assyrian force around Lachish. Computer projections are that the Assyrians will not be able to sustain the current invasion."

"In that case, the Assyrians' next move could be a retreat along the south side of the Dead Sea. Have you detected any signs of pursuit from Jerusalem," Kirk asked.

"No, Sir. Just some small scouting patrols near the city. It looks like the city is being very cautious."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Continue searching for the Romulans, and keep me posted."

Kirk tried to return his thoughts to reports and paperwork, but his mind refused to acknowledge anything except how tired he felt. He couldn't ignore his need for sleep indefinitely, but then, Starfleet wasn't known for handing out promotions to officers who were lax with their paperwork. Feeling drowsy, Kirk lay back on his bunk and laughed at how he had forgotten about the promotion he wasn't even sure he

wanted, and about the rumored time in spacedock for the Enterprise, and the inevitable disbursement of the fine crew he regarded almost as family. He judged himself slightly crazy for busting a gut to straighten out Trelane's mess so he could return to a time line which could bring to an end the best years of his career. The sound of the door buzzer kept him from dwelling further on these depressing thoughts.

Sitting up in his bunk, he said, "Come in."

His door opened with a quiet hiss, and Dr. McCoy entered his quarters carrying a tray which held food on a plate and a bottle.

"I brought you a sandwich, Jim," McCoy announced. "After what you've been through I'm going to have to make sure that you eat properly for a while."

Kirk noticed that McCoy had also brought two glasses. "I appreciate the food," he said, rubbing his eyes, "but I'm swamped with work. I'll have to pass on the Saurian Brandy, if that's what you have in the bottle."

"It's not Saurian Brandy," McCoy smiled. "What I have here is something I prepared especially for you. Non-alcoholic fruit juices, electrolytes, and a choice selection of vitamin supplements. If its taste matches

its nutritional value, you're going to love it."

McCoy filled the two glasses he had brought as Kirk took a bite of the sandwich. Kirk couldn't identify what was between the pieces of bread, but if McCoy was pushing nutrition, he figured he wasn't going to get out of eating it. Besides, it didn't taste all that bad.

"Good sandwich," Kirk said between bites. "Did you program this from the food synthesizer yourself?"

"Actually..., I had a little help from Nurse Chapel," McCoy admitted. "She still understands that fool contraption better than I do."

Kirk studied McCoy as he took a sip of the nutritional cocktail he had brought. "Tell me, Bones," he said, "how are you feeling? You seemed pretty disappointed when we beamed up."

"You mean about that Assyrian soldier? I'm dealing with it, Jim. I guess there really wasn't much I could have done for him even if I had brought him up here. Let me tell you something; losing a patient never gets any easier, no matter how it happens."

"I guess not," Kirk agreed before absently taking a sip of the nutritional cocktail.

"Well, what do you think?" McCoy asked brightly,

trying to establish a more cheerful atmosphere.

"The drink? Not too bad, actually," Kirk smiled, smacking his lips, "but in my expert opinion, it needs...something."

"I'll tell you what," McCoy offered, "when we get back I'll mix up another batch of this stuff, and then we'll go find a little 'something' to put in it."

"You're on," said Kirk as he emptied his glass. "And now, if you don't mind, Doctor, I still have my paperwork to wade through."

McCoy got up to go, taking only his glass of the fruit juice cocktail. "I guess I know when I'm not wanted," he quipped. "But since you've been so cooperative, and have eaten your lunch, I'm going to go and enter some nice comments in your medical record."

"Thanks again for everything, Bones," said Kirk as McCoy headed for the door.

"There's no need to thank me," said McCoy, turning around at the door. "I didn't have to pick up the check for this meal."

Repairs to the Romulan warship Talon had progressed well. By the time the retreating Assyrians had reached Lachish, the Talon was again fully functional.

The ceasefire agreed to by Kirk and Tarsus appeared to be holding. In fact, both crews seemed to be much less on edge and working better now that maintaining hostilities was no longer a standing order. There was a growing cooperation between the two ships on the matter of reclaiming the two lost Romulans, although many on both ships had quietly expressed the opinion that things could quickly change once Ksariss and Kohbrah were back on board.

Sensors on both the Enterprise and the Talon began providing evidence that the entire Assyrian force around Lachish was preparing to break camp and leave. In response, Kirk and Tarsus agreed on a plan to beam a small landing party into the Assyrian camp that night to search for Kohbrah and Ksariss.

Kirk desperately needed to rest before leading the

Enterprise contingent of the landing party. Satisfied with the progress he had been able to make on the first drafts of some of his reports, he put them aside and stretched out on his bunk. Before dropping off to sleep, his thoughts drifted to unanswered questions about Trelane which kept returning to haunt him: Where was Trelane? Why had it been so long since his last appearance? Could he be playing a cat-and-mouse game with them, skulking about somewhere, possibly posing as members of the crew, waiting to gleefully spring out and frustrate any attempts to try to save Earth from colliding with Mars, or even prohibiting them from later returning to their own time...?

* * *

Night had overtaken the Middle East. The landing parties from both ships - Kirk, Spock, Kramer, Sabat, Tarsus and two of his security officers - had beamed down together to coordinates inside the Assyrian camp. The two ships' sensor scans, along with

Kramer's knowledge of Assyrian campaign protocol, had indicated where the tents of the Emperor, and those of his closest advisors, should have been pitched for the night. A grouping of tents erected late in the afternoon had matched the expected configuration and had provided the coordinates of a discrete location suitable for a beam-down point.

Once on the ground they all gathered silently near Kramer, waiting for instructions. He carefully examined the layout of the tents around him. Everything seemed to be as he had expected, but he was surprised that actually standing in the camp gave everything a slightly different perspective from looking down upon a diagram in a textbook. Once he was certain he had his bearings, he pointed in the direction toward which they should head.

With their weapons in hand, Kirk and Tarsus led the group noiselessly down a deserted avenue between the tents. They passed by a tent with a light inside where several hushed voices were engaged in an intense argument. Something in what they were saying caught Kirk's attention. He motioned for everyone to stop and listen. Tarsus gave Kirk a questioning look. Kirk held his finger to his lips, and softly crept closer to the tent. The others also stole over to listen.

"Our Emperor was at one time a tolerable military leader, but this Judean campaign has been little more than mistakes and tragedy," lamented one voice.

"I personally advised him against this plan," boasted a second voice. "He should have eliminated Hezekiah years ago when he first refused to pay tribute!"

"I doubt he could have beaten Hezekiah even then," sarcastically contributed a third voice. "Sennacherib isn't half the military man his father Sargon was! The only reason he has been able to enlarge the empire is because the world still fears his father's Assyria!"

"We are wasting time!" reminded a fourth voice. "For whatever our reasons, we have bonded ourselves to an oath to assassinate Sennacherib. Let it be tonight, as we agreed."

There was a quiet chorus of agreement from inside the tent, and then there was a stirring as the would-be assassins donned their robes and collected their weapons. As the members of the landing party withdrew into the shadows, the assassins emerged from their tent, quickly scanned for onlookers, and then stole into the darkness toward the tents of Sennacherib.

"Are you going to allow this to happen, Kirk?" whispered Tarsus.

"We are not here to interfere with Assyrian politics," said Kirk. "We are only looking for your people."

Kramer elbowed his way to Kirk's side and urgently objected, "Captain, we can't let this happen! Sennacherib cannot die tonight! His death is recorded as happening in his capital city, Nineveh, after this campaign, and by assassination at the hands of his sons."

Then Tarsus stepped in front of Kirk. "Consider this, Captain Kirk," he proposed. "If Sennacherib believes that Ksariss is some kind of sorceress, and if she serves as one of his personal advisors, he might want to meet with her soon after arriving here. He might want her to determine what his future holds. Ksariss and Kohbrah might be with him, but if they are not, perhaps he could be persuaded to summon them."

Kirk reasoned that Kramer's objection to non-intervention and Tarsus' suppositions constituted sufficient cause to keep the Assyrian Emperor alive for the time being. He nodded his assent, and then led the landing party to stealthily follow the band of

assassins, all the while hoping not to be discovered by them or any other Assyrian soldiers.

Indeed, the Emperor was at that moment meeting with his sorceress and her bodyguard in his private sleeping chamber. He was distraught and still in shock, overcome by the suddenness and the magnitude of the event which had literally obliterated his army, dashing any mortal hope of conquering Egypt and humiliating Hezekiah for years to come. He fitfully paced back and forth.

"I am ruined," he moaned. Thrusting a quaking finger toward Ksariss, he exclaimed, "You did this to me, you wretched witch! Why did you press me toward Jerusalem? What evil did you summon down upon my army?"

Ksariss had grown tired of the Emperor's ranting and whining. How the nation of Assyria had ever achieved its position of ascendancy on the planet Earth with people such as Sennacherib to lead it was beyond her ability to comprehend. The Emperor's screeching distractions were keeping her from thinking about her own problems. It didn't require an eminent scholar to understand that Trelane's quirky scheme had all but fallen apart. And, speaking of Trelane, where was the despicable rascal? The obvious answer: unwilling to show himself now that

he had lost control of whatever had really been going on. He had apparently just vanished. He had left her terminally stranded in a situation with no way out. Wrong, she chided herself! There was always a way out. But to figure it out, she first needed to get control of the ranting and very scared Emperor of Assyria.

"Please!" she cried. "Gather your wits about you, Your Highness! A battle has been lost, not an entire war! Nobody is strong enough to hurt you in your own land. We'll go home now, rest, and prepare a proper army. And a better plan. Forget about Judah. We'll make Egypt your next conquest. Yes, we'll take Egypt and cut off trade with Hezekiah. Then, with no foreign trade to replenish his treasury, Hezekiah will be forced into submission!"

Sennacherib, Emperor of Assyria, gave Ksariss a long, abhorrent look. "Now you say 'attack Egypt'? Now you say that I was right?" the now crimson-faced emperor screeched a full octave higher. "Am I such a complete fool that you think I would listen to you twice?! Get out of my sight!"

Fuming, Ksariss spun around to leave, but suddenly stepped back into the chamber. She had heard faintly what had sounded like a struggle and a muffled groan of agony from outside. She drew out a sword, which she had appropriated and hidden within the folds of

her garments.

Kohbrah did not understand why Ksariss had jumped back in the chamber and had produced a sword. He wondered if she was going to attack the Assyrian Emperor to punish him for his insults and rebuff. If this was so, he knew he would have to try to stop her. The very progression of his promising career, not to mention his current elevated standing in the Romulan military hierarchy could in some way depend upon not changing the history of the human's planet. Fortunately, he remembered, the Emperor had summoned the two of them secretly to his chambers that evening. He had admitted them himself, thus bypassing the usual confiscation of weapons by his bodyguards. Kohbrah still retained his sword. Stepping toward Ksariss, he withdrew it.

Four of Sennacherib's senior officers swept into the chamber, one of them brandishing a sword stained with blood. Kohbrah and Ksariss together stepped back, while Sennacherib looked frantically around for something with which to defend himself. Two of the assassins moved menacingly toward Kohbrah and Ksariss, while the other two hurried to cut the unarmed Sennacherib off from retreat or assistance.

The Emperor's own sword lay sheathed beside his bed at the feet of Ksariss. She threw her own weapon

across the bed to Sennacherib who caught it clumsily and engaged his two assailants in a pitiful battle, which, if left to his own swordsmanship, he would shortly lose. While Kohbrah defended the two of them, Ksariss stooped, groping for the Emperor's sword, and finding the hilt, she withdrew the sword from its scabbard and assisted Kohbrah as well as she could.

The Federation and Romulan landing party had seen the four assassins draw their swords and enter the Emperor's tent. They heard one of the Emperor's bodyguards challenge the assassins for daring to enter the Emperor's quarters with drawn weapons, and they heard him die defending his Emperor. As quietly as possible, the entire group raced to the Emperor's tent.

As they passed through the outer entrance, they encountered the body of the single loyal bodyguard.

"Only one guard," whispered one of the Romulan security officers. "These assassins have friends close to the Emperor."

Kirk motioned with his hand phaser and led the group toward the sounds of clashing swords. They reached the inner chamber and tore the curtain aside. The Emperor was quickly losing ground, pressed

relentlessly back by his two more skilled opponents, while on the other side of the chamber, Kohbrah and Ksariss seemed to be holding their own against their pair of assailants.

"Weapons on stun, and aim for the assassins," ordered Kirk.

Within seconds the four assassins lay immobilized on the ground. The Emperor looked in confused disbelief from Kohbrah and Ksariss to the oddly dressed group of people who had just thwarted the latest, and closest to successful attempt on his life.

"Who are you? What is going on here? Where are my bodyguards?" the Emperor hesitantly demanded as he staggered toward Kirk.

"Your bodyguard is dead," said Kirk while passing an almost imperceptible signal to Spock. "As for what is going on, my guess would be that you have just survived an attempted assassination. As to the question of our identity, I can only say that we are people who have come to reclaim our own."

"I still know not who you are, nor do I understand how you have done what you have done, but if you will journey with me to Nineveh, my capital city, I will handsomely reward you...", suggested Sennacherib.

The Emperor had not seen Spock move in behind him. Spock grasped him at the base of his neck, and a moment later lowered him unconscious onto his bed.

"What do you suggest we do with them, Captain?" asked Spock.

Kirk thought for a moment, and then said, "It would be best if they could all forget what has happened tonight."

Kirk and Spock looked at each other, understanding, neither of them needing to say the words 'mind meld'.

"I won't order you to do this if you have any objections," said Kirk.

"I have no objections, Captain," said Spock. "In fact, I am in complete agreement with your solution."

Kirk turned to Tarsus. "Perhaps this would be a good time to beam your people back to your ship while we tidy things up a little. Please explain to Commander Kobrah what has happened, and convey my sincere wish that the cooperation between us will continue."

"I shall do my best, Captain Kirk," promised Tarsus. He then instructed his security officers to stand next

to Kohbrah and Ksariss before energizing his communicator. "Transporter, beam-up for five."

As soon as the effects of the Romulan transporter had subsided, Spock established a mind meld with the first of the Assyrian assassins and clouded his memory of having taken part in the attempted assassination. He then quickly performed the same procedure on the other three assassins.

Meanwhile, Kirk listened and watched with Sabat and Kramer for signs of intruders. Things remained quiet.

Kirk glanced back at Spock, asking, "Everything going well?"

"Very well, Captain. Only the Emperor remains."

Spock placed his hands upon the Emperor's head and concentrated on linking with his thoughts. Again, Kirk glanced back to check on Spock and saw a puzzled look on his face. Then, for an instant, Spock's face reflected pain, and then, concerned understanding.

Kirk's attention was diverted from Spock by Ensign Kramer who had heard people approaching outside the tent. From the sounds Kirk guessed that a relief

detachment of bodyguards had discovered their dead comrade outside. Within seconds they would arrive in the Emperor's chambers.

"Spock, we're getting company," hissed Kirk.

Spock laid the Emperor's head on the edge of the bed and said, "I have finished, Captain."

With the sounds of approaching guards pressing him, Kirk spoke into his communicator. "Scotty, four to beam up."

* * *

The party of four stepped off the transporter platform and dispersed toward their regular duty stations. Kirk and Spock found themselves alone in the turbolift to the bridge.

"One could almost feel sorry for him," said Spock.

"Sorry?" Kirk asked. "Sorry for whom?"

"The Emperor," explained Spock. "There are many frightened and negative facets to his personality."

"Oh?" Kirk questioned.

"He fears most of all that he will never exceed the accomplishments of his father," Spock further explained. "He almost constantly fears for his life; he is compulsively apprehensive; he is suspicious of everybody; and because he must constantly ignore his own desires to please disputing factions of his supporters to maintain power, he is angry that he no longer controls his own destiny."

"Imagine," said Kirk, "wielding that much power, and never being fully in control of it."

"If this is all so illogical," said Spock, "then why do humans crave so greatly the accumulation of power?"

The turbolift door had opened onto the bridge. Kirk looked into Spock's eyes, wishing he had an answer to Spock's last question. He hadn't, and he hadn't time to think of one.

---- CHAPTER SIXTEEN ----

Shocked and enraged, Ksariss charged off the transporter platform on the Talon. Spinning around

to face Subcommander Tarsus, she flung her arms out and shrieked, "What has been going on here during my absence? I cannot believe that I have seen members of this crew taking orders from our Federation enemies!"

Tarsus attempted to explain. "Ambassador, if you will just allow me a little time..."

"Be silent!" she bellowed. "I know what I saw! You, bowing to the will of James Kirk! I shall order you into the brig, you traitor, along with the scatterbrained dolts under you who permitted you to assume command!"

"Just a moment, Ambassador!" Kohbrah objected. "I trust this officer to command in my absence, and I want to hear from him what happened."

Astounded, Ksariss froze. Kohbrah had dared to openly challenge her authority! She slowly drew in a breath and held it, grim determination fueling her judgment that the time had finally come to strip Kohbrah's ship and his career from him.

Standing haughty and confident, she turned to face the technicians at the transporter control console. "Call armed security personnel immediately," she ordered, "and have them confine Commander

Kohbrah and Subcommander Tarsus in the brig!"

The shorter of the two men behind the control console looked apprehensively at his bulkier colleague, as if to draw support, and then snapped to attention, stiffly responding, "With all due respect to your office, Ambassador Ksariss, I must refuse to obey your order."

For several long seconds Ksariss listened to the dead silence mocking her. She could sense her most secret fear, the emptiness of her authority, being exposed, awakening and preparing to assault the weights and bonds of repression she had applied against it in her long struggle to keep it under control and out of her thoughts. She chastised herself. Fight back! Turn the situation around!

She turned to the larger man. "You heard my order: carry it out!"

The second technician also snapped to attention and responded, "Sorry, Ambassador. I stand with my shipmate."

Ksariss lunged at the smaller technician, slapping him fiercely across the side of his face. She drew back her hand, intending to deliver a similar blow to the second insubordinate crewman. As her hand arced

toward its target, the second technician thrust his muscular arm upward and firmly grasped her wrist. Ksariss struggled, but her wrist stayed exactly where it had been intercepted.

"Release the Ambassador," instructed Commander Kohbrah. "It is time to put an end to this foolishness." He then turned to face Ambassador Ksariss, standing formally at full height before her. "Ambassador Ksariss, you have been little more than a disruptive influence to the morale of my crew and to the efficient running of this ship since setting foot upon its decks."

"Your crew refused to obey my order!" Ksariss protested.

"Your order?" challenged Kohbrah. "Madame Ambassador, you have given a great many 'orders' since you were rescued and brought onto this ship. My crew and I have repeatedly been victims of your abusive and self-centered 'orders'. Nothing you have initiated from your position of authority on this ship has been intended solely for the greater glory of the Empire. You have, instead, only used your position to further one or another of your many personal vendettas. My dear Ambassador, I formally relieve you of your responsibility to command this ship."

Kohbrah reached to the control panel and activated

the intercom. "This is Commander Kohbrah. Send a detachment of security personnel to the transporter area. Tell them they will confine Ambassador Ksariss within her new quarters, a secure cell within our brig."

Ksariss protested, made threats, and invoked the names of powerful acquaintances, all to no avail. Kohbrah would not be swayed. Secretly, he reveled in the approving looks on the faces of everyone who witnessed her removal.

"She has many powerful supporters, Sir," Tarsus pointed out as Ksariss and her escort left the area. "What will you do about her if we are able to return to our own time?"

"Neither the Ambassador nor her friends need fear that I will try to hide what I have done," said Kohbrah. "I also count several influential people among my acquaintances. If we are able to return, I will personally request a Fleet Commander's review of my actions. But, enough about the problem of the Ambassador. Let us find a quiet place to talk, Subcommander. I get the feeling there are many things you will want to explain to me."

Suddenly a light on the control panel caught the attention of one of the transporter technicians.

"Commander, a summons from the bridge."

Kohbrah returned to the transporter control console and opened the appropriate channel. "This is Commander Kohbrah."

"We have an incoming message from the Enterprise, Commander, from Captain Kirk."

Turning to Tarsus, Kohbrah said, "Your report will have to wait until I see what this Federation Captain wants. I give you my word, this will not take long." Then reopening the channel to the bridge, he responded, "Tell Captain Kirk I will speak with him very soon."

Several minutes later Kohbrah was comfortably seated in his command chair. Seeing that the Commander was ready, the communications officer brought the image of Kirk onto the viewscreen.

"Yes, Captain Kirk, what do you want?"

"We need your help, Commander Kohbrah. You are, no doubt, aware of the situation both our ships are in: a time displacement of three thousand years into the past, and a planetary collision which threatens to destroy the home world of many of my crewmembers."

Unaware of the degree of cooperation which had evolved between the two ships, Kohbrah found the concept of cooperating with a Federation ship somewhat amusing. "Why should I help you out of this situation, Kirk? If your home planet is destroyed, there will be no meddling humans to annoy the brave pioneers who forged our empire. The prospect of eliminating the human problem so easily should appeal to any soundly thinking Romulan."

"Where would the Empire be if not for the inspiration it derived from its competition with us humans?" asked Kirk. "Can you honestly say you would have accomplished all you have without our influence?"

"I know what you're trying to make me say, Kirk," smiled Kohbrah, "but the truth is the Empire never needed the war with humankind to make it great. If that was all it took, we could have just as easily fought with the Klingons."

"Alright," said Kirk, trying a different approach, "then perhaps you will help us because you owe it to your crew as well as to mine. You'll eventually find out that it was a combined effort that found you and returned you and the Ambassador to your ship. If that isn't enough, I have something additional to offer in exchange for your cooperation."

"What could you possibly offer me, Kirk? My ship is easily an equal of yours."

"I can offer you the means to return to the life you left behind. Your ship can do it, Commander, but you don't know how. I have that information."

Kohbrah saw that most of the bridge crew was watching him expectantly. He could see in their eyes a yearning to return home. It had probably been on their minds since discovering the time displacement, along with the knowledge that there was no way to accomplish it. Until now. Kirk had just dangled the prospect in front of them. A Federation Starship Captain had offered to help them accomplish the impossible, if they would help him accomplish the impossible. Cooperation between the Empire and the Federation? After having been blood enemies for the last hundred years? But wait, Kirk had said something about a combined effort. He and Ksariss had been located and rescued by a joint landing party. Perhaps officially the Empire and the Federation were still enemies, but that antagonism would not develop for another three thousand years. Maybe it was possible, this one time, to put the rules aside.

"I will not reject your proposal outright, Captain. I will think about it after I have had time to hear my Executive Officer's report. After that I will give you

my decision."

"Good enough, Commander," said Kirk. "If you accept my proposal of cooperation, I invite you and the Ambassador and your engineers to beam over at your convenience to plan our course of action."

Kohbrah laughed at the prospect of Ksariss voluntarily returning to the Enterprise. Then he remembered that he had ordered her thrown into the brig. It doesn't matter how she feels about a visit to Kirk's ship, he thought smugly, because I wouldn't let her out of her cell to go there if she wanted to.

"The Ambassador is indisposed for the time being," smiled Kohbrah. "In fact, I don't see her taking part in any major decisions for at least the foreseeable future. However, I promise to contact you later with my decision."

Kohbrah's image flashed off the viewscreen, and in the silence which followed, Kirk sat thinking. He remembered hearing that a team of engineers was sifting through a portfolio of schemes, attempting to come up with some way that a single starship could keep two relatively small planets from colliding. Kirk did not envy anyone who had been assigned to that team. Surely they had fielded some outlandish and bizarre proposals. But, if he was going to ask the

Romulans to help solve this problem, he should at least have some ideas to present to them.

"Mr. Spock," he finally said, "I would like you, Dr. McCoy, Mr. Scott, and Ensigns Sabat and Kramer in the briefing room in ten minutes. We have a world to save."

Aboard the Talon, Commander Kohbrah had sent Subcommander Tarsus to his quarters, instructing him to order a light meal for both of them. While Tarsus had gone to carry out this simple directive, Kohbrah had randomly posed a few questions to several of the junior officers at various stations around the bridge. He left the bridge later to join Tarsus in his quarters with a pleased smile on his face.

He entered Tarsus' quarters seeing that Tarsus had laid out the foods he had ordered on a low table between two comfortable chairs. "I hope this meets with your approval, Commander," said Tarsus. "There didn't seem to be any other suitable place..."

"This is fine," Kohbrah smiled. "Please, sit down and have your meal. I want to hear your report, but first, I want to propose that we put aside formalities for a while. The Ambassador is no longer a factor in the running of this ship, so you no longer need fear her. And, I promise that no action will be taken

against you, nor will any reprimand be entered into your record for any decision you have made while in command of this vessel. You should know that I have asked around for assessments of your performance while in command. Your subordinates have unanimously complimented your performance. As my ship is still in one piece, I assume you must have done some things right. So, I want the whole story: the facts, and your impressions of what you experienced."

"As you wish, Sir," said Tarsus hesitantly as studied Kohbrah, searching for reassuring signs that the Commander's pledge to overlook his failures and mistakes was on the up and up. Trusting his instincts, he picked up a plate and began.

"When you and the Ambassador disappeared, we discovered that we had completely lost warp power. Immediately I put repair crews on the problem, but it took a long time to root out all the little things that had gone wrong. As we worked, the Enterprise constantly scanned the planet we were orbiting. The Enterprise beamed somebody up from the surface just as I received the report that all systems were operational. Not wishing to fall into a tactically inferior position, Sir, I gave the order to attack. Because of our attack they were immobilized, and we were weakening their shields, and then, somehow,

Kirk got his ship to move, and a salvo of my torpedoes and disruptor fire missed him and impacted on the planet. This misfortune inadvertently caused many casualties among the group of humans you were with. Then, Kirk's ship did something quite unexpected. It stopped and just floated: no shields, and no weapons. I closed in, foolishly with the shields lowered, preparing to board, and then Kirk hit us with a torpedo which completely disabled our engine controls. It's embarrassing, Sir. I had him, and Kirk still beat me."

"Somehow, that does not surprise me," said Kohbrah slowly. "This Kirk is either a very gifted, or a very lucky tactician. Anyway, please continue with your report."

"Yes, Sir. Kirk did not gloat or press his advantage. Instead he asked for a cease-fire. Not a surrender, you understand, but a cease-fire. He offered to help repair the ship, and he was very concerned about locating and rescuing you and the Ambassador. What most convinced me that he was sincere about putting aside hostilities was when I beamed over to his ship to discuss your retrieval; he had no security personnel nearby to infer that I could not be trusted. Commander, I sincerely believe that he sees cooperation as the best solution to our problems. To

insure our cooperation, he has agreed to our taking Ambassador Ksariss back to our time in our ship. That is, if he really can return us to our own time."

"I believe he knows how to do that," said Kohbrah quietly, as though confiding something of utmost secrecy. "There are sketchy reports of his Enterprise having successfully attempted time travel. Unfortunately, the important details are not available. Perhaps Kirk is right - we should help each other a little in this case. But remember, in our own time the Federation is once more the enemy. We are still bound to return Ambassador Ksariss to Romulus."

"Understood, Sir."

"Good. Now, as we finish our meal I want you to go through your report again, this time with more attention to tiny details. I need to be more familiar with Captain Kirk before I agree to anything when I visit him."

* * *

"I want to thank you all for being here on such short notice," Kirk said to the people he had called to the meeting in the briefing room. "We have the problem of a planetary collision to consider, and we'll get to that in a minute. First, however, I'd like to establish some idea of what our solar system is supposed to look like at this point in the Velikovsky scenario. It might show us what results our efforts have to produce. Mr. Kramer, I believe this is your area of expertise."

"Well, Sir, at this point, according to Dr. Velikovsky, our situation bears very little similarity to his scenario. You see, as Dr. Velikovsky presented things, the Assyrian army was destroyed when Mars passed through its closest point to Earth, with the exchange in orbital momentum deflecting Mars out to the orbit we expect it to have. As things stand now, the Assyrian army is destroyed, but the encounter with Mars still looms. To bring everything back into its expected sequence, we have to have Mars on its way out to its proper orbit. Now, assuming that we can move it to its proper distance from the Sun, we have to also place it in its proper orbital position so that zodiac charts and all other celestial observations over the next three thousand years won't change."

"In other words," interrupted Kirk, "it's going to be very, very difficult to fix this problem properly?"

"Virtually impossible, Captain," stated Spock. "The amount of effort needed to place Mars at its proper orbital location, at the velocity required to maintain its orbit, and in the direction it needs to be moving requires many times more energy than our ship is capable of generating."

"You've thoroughly researched this conclusion?" asked Kirk.

"Aye, it's been very carefully researched, Captain," said Scott. "You can well imagine that we've had engineers coming out of the cracks in the bulkheads with innovative and novel solutions to this problem. We've waded through hundreds of unworkable schemes. The numbers don't lie, Sir. They keep telling us that we just don't have the power."

"And have there been any other proposals?" asked Kirk.

After several seconds of silence Sabat spoke. "Yes there have, Captain. I have a proposal which I have been fielding to members of this crew for the last few days. It hasn't exactly met with resounding approval, but I think you will find it interesting."

"I'm sure we'd all like to hear it, Ensign," said Kirk, his curiosity piqued. "Would you care to present it to us?"

"Certainly," Sabat agreed. "My proposal is to solve the problem by attempting to eliminate the cause of it."

"I assume you are referring to the planet Mars?" ventured Kirk.

"Yes, Sir," affirmed Sabat. "In the simplest possible terms, I propose that we eliminate the threat to the Earth by attempting to blow up Mars."

"Now just let's hold things a minute!" McCoy exploded indignantly. "Blow up Mars? Assuming that somebody figures out how to do it, do you have any idea of what will change over the next three thousand years? You're talking about several millennia of fascination with a major celestial body. You're talking about cancelling early space program probes, the first manned landings, and the establishment of the Martian Colonies. What will happen to all the people who live there now if their home passes out of existence three thousand years in the past?"

"If that were to happen, Doctor," Spock calmly explained, "there would be no planet Mars to colonize."

Therefore, there would be no Martian Colonies, or colonists. Its disappearance would likely result in another fable to add to Greco/Roman traditions. Also, the absence of Mars would not completely cripple Earth's Renaissance learning as Galileo would still be able to observe the moons of Jupiter, and the space program funds expended on the exploration of Mars might be allocated to the additional exploitation of resources on Earth's, or possibly Jupiter's moons."

"I can see why it's easy for you to write off one of our neighboring planets," accused McCoy. "You don't even live here!"

"Gentlemen, please!" admonished Kirk. "Ensign Sabat's proposal poses a simple choice: what are we willing to sacrifice - an object of fascination and our home planet, or just an object of fascination? It also leaves us wondering how we would go about eliminating a body half the size of the Earth. If there are no practical solutions for this problem, we'll just have to put the proposal aside."

Sabat gazed intently into Kirk's eyes and said, "Before my proposal is cast aside, Captain, I suggest that you make some detailed scans of the body in question. If my assumptions are correct, you will find it quite different from the Mars you would expect to find."

Kirk returned Sabat's gaze, studying him. Ensign Sabat, or Gary Seven, was discretely asking him to rely on his command intuition. Perhaps Sabat knew something that he was choosing not to reveal. Perhaps there was a clue hidden somewhere, somehow on the displaced red planet. Deciding to trust the inclinations of his intuition, Kirk said, "We'll recess this meeting for a while. Mr. Spock, take whomever you need and run every scan possible on our present planet Mars. We'll reconvene later, after you've assembled and organized your data. Mister Sabat, I'd like a quick word with you before you go."

Sabat and Kirk remained in their seats as the other crewmen arose and filed out of the briefing room. When they were at last alone, Kirk said, "I understand that you and your assistant were instrumental in saving the lives of Mr. Spock and me. On behalf of my first officer, I'd like to say thanks from both of us."

"I had a little help, Captain," smiled Sabat. "The others deserve credit also."

"Our gratitude has been duly noted in their records," Kirk revealed. "I thought you should know that Lt. Commander Scott has informed me of the background check he ran on you."

"I hope he didn't uncover anything that would

weaken your trust in me, Captain."

"Not in the least, Ensign. But I'm curious: is there some reason I should give your proposal about the planet Mars any special consideration?"

"The proposal is the source of the only solution to your remaining problems, Captain."

"Can't you tell me anything more?" pressed Kirk.

"Only that what will have to be done will require the resources of both starships," said Sabat.

Obviously, Kirk thought, Sabat has revealed all that he will for the time being. "Thank you, Ensign," he said as he stood up. "I suggest that we return to our duty stations. I have to prepare for a visit from my Romulan counterpart."

* * *

Commander Kohbrah had taken his time before

informing Kirk on the Enterprise that he had agreed to a meeting and was almost ready to beam over. Not that Kirk had seemed to mind, Spock reflected, as he and his quickly chosen assistants had needed the time to complete the battery of scans which the Captain had ordered at the request of Ensign Sabat, or Gary Seven. Kirk had related this bit of information to Spock during one of his stops to monitor the progress of the scans. It must have been his human half, thought Spock, which had momentarily indulged in the emotion of gratitude upon learning of the real identity of Ensign Sabat. It was now possible for him to formulate acceptable theories which explained several mysterious occurrences on the ship which had defied his previous attempts at analysis. Having put these matters to rest, he now was able to focus his complete attention on the final steps of translating the data from the latest round of scans into useable information.

Meanwhile in the transporter room Kirk nervously paced the floor, anxiously walking off the last few minutes before Kohbrah's arrival. He had seen the preliminary results of Spock's planetary scans of Trelane's Mars and had persuaded Spock to reluctantly attempt to relate some of the raw data to Sabat's seemingly far-fetched proposal to blow up the planet. Spock had mentioned several possibilities, and

had expressed several strong reservations, and then Kirk had run Spock's verbal assessments by Lt. Commander Scott. In spite of having agreed with most of Spock's reservations, Scott had added a few possibilities of his own, but in reality, their discussions had produced nothing substantial enough to act on without first seeing the final reports. With Commander Kohbrah arriving momentarily, it appeared they would all see Spock's completed report for the first time in the briefing room.

"Prepare yourself, Captain," advised Lt. Commander Scott at the transporter controls. "The Romulan Commander is on his way."

Scott deftly manipulated the controls to start the familiar humming of the transporter. Seconds later the Romulan Commander materialized on the Enterprise's transporter platform.

Commander Kohbrah looked around from his slightly elevated vantage point and saw that Subcommander Tarsus had been right - there were no security guards. Obviously Kirk was still trying to make a favorable impression, and this was Kirk's first bit of salesmanship to convince him to accept the idea of cooperation. No doubt, if Kirk had harbored any hostility toward him, he could have easily have arranged for the presence of an 'honor guard'.

Perhaps Kirk was being open, honest, and sincere. If so, these were unexpected facets of humankind's personality.

Kirk stepped forward. "Welcome aboard the Enterprise, Commander Kohbrah," he said. "I am Captain James Kirk, and at the transporter controls is Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, Chief Engineer."

"Captain Kirk," Kohbrah acknowledged. Turning to Scott, he said, "Well done, Lieutenant Commander Scott. It was...a very smooth ride."

"Aye," replied Scott. "You can count on that from my transporters."

"Such a modest Chief Engineer you have," remarked Kohbrah to Kirk.

"Yes. It's a trait we have learned to tolerate," returned Kirk with a slight grin toward Scott. "Will anyone else be joining you, Commander?"

"Not at this time, Captain Kirk. Perhaps later, if they are needed."

"Very well, Commander. If you'll accompany Lt. Commander Scott and me, we'll all go to the briefing room and get right to work."

* * *

Seated across the conference table from Mr. Spock, Commander Kohbrah listened with genuine interest to the incredible story which unfolded during his briefing. Captain Kirk began what would become a long and involved tale with an account of the Enterprise's initial encounter with Squire Trelane. He was followed by Ensign Kramer who explained the Velikovsky theories, and how they believed Trelane had discovered and used them as a basis for his flawed recreation into which the Enterprise and the Talon had been placed. If Kohbrah had just heard the Federation crew's presentation without having been an active participant in the event, he would have been inclined to dismiss the story as so much rubbish. However, he had met Trelane, and had felt the flames of the child-being's passionate obsession for revenge: passionate enough to destroy an entire populated world solely for the purpose of tormenting one of its spawn. Kohbrah related some of his experiences while posing as a member of the Assyrian force which revealed how greatly Trelane's irrational - and certainly childish - hatred toward Kirk had grown. He also openly admitted to feeling compassion for the

inhabitants of Earth, for if there was no way to control a being like Trelane, what was there to stop him from reappearing with an even grander scheme to punish James Kirk and humankind if he chose to do so? At this point Ensign Sabat finally spoke up, reminding them all that they were digressing from their planned agenda, and that Mr. Spock had been waiting patiently to reveal the results of his scans of the planet Mars.

"Thank you for that reminder, Ensign," smiled Kirk, relieved to have escaped dealing with the possibility of a next visit from Trelane. "We really don't have time to dwell heavily on side issues, so, Mr. Spock, please bring us back on track if you will."

"Thank you, Captain. A collision between the fourth and third planetary bodies in this system is inevitable," Spock began. "None of the data we have collected can tell us how this came to be. The most likely theory seems to be that Mars was set onto its present heading by some device controlled by Squire Trelane, however, we have not been able to locate or confirm the existence of such a device. Therefore, since we cannot use whatever initiated this potentially catastrophic scenario to end it, we are left with devising a terminating strategy which uses resources currently available to us."

"We have analyzed data from detailed scans of the

body which threatens Earth. This data had brought to light some unanticipated discoveries. The body we scanned is very much different from the Mars depicted in our computer's database. This miscreant Mars has suffered from tremendous heat-inducing stresses, possibly from a sudden application of the great force necessary to wrench it from its original benign orbit and onto its present collision heading. Its entire surface, including its polar regions, is volcanically active. In fact, at its present rate of activity, the planet could not possibly stabilize enough to allow the manned landings which occurred in the twenty-first century. Its surface shows a constantly changing pattern of faults occurring in a very thin, ductile crust. Readings show that only several kilometers below the surface lay layers of molten material which increase in temperature with depth. Given the rate at which subsurface temperatures increase with depth, there is a strong possibility that plasma pockets exist near the planet's core. From these readings I conclude that the extraordinary forces which ejected Mars from its original orbit were applied relatively recently, and that the planet has not cooled appreciably since that time."

"All very interesting," conceded Kohbrah, "but what does it all mean?"

With only a slight pause, Spock continued, "Simply that this Mars, in its present state, is essentially a super-heated liquid mass. Because it is a liquid, its component molecules are not as tightly bonded as those of a solid, and its high internal temperatures further increase the disassociation between its molecules. Of greater interest, however, is this possibility of plasma pockets at the core. Plasma, as you know, may be described as a superheated stew of disassociated sub-atomic particles. In this highly energized free-particle environment it is much easier to induce high-energy reactions which are not possible in the three more ordered states of matter. Based upon the strong possibility of encountering subsurface areas of high temperature and advanced states of molecular and atomic disassociation, we believe that a sufficiently high-energy reaction introduced into one of these plasma areas would become self-sustaining, and spread from the core region to the outer liquid layers, all the while building a compressed front which would eventually break up the planet."

Kohbrah chuckled quietly and shook his head. "Surely you all can appreciate that the power of even the most modern starships is limited when you start talking about breaking up planets. Assuming that a plasma pocket, if it even exists, would be immobile

long enough for you to determine its coordinates, how would you introduce that much energy into it?"

Lt. Commander Scott cleared his throat. "If you don't mind, Mr. Spock, I'll take credit for my half of this hare-brained idea."

"By all means, please proceed, Mr. Scott," said Spock, taking his seat.

"I have suggested to Mr. Spock that we use modified photon torpedoes to deliver high-energy reactants into the planet's core," said Scott. "Torpedoes with reinforced casings have already been experimentally utilized in several planetary engineering projects. In order to penetrate the denser outer layers of the planet Mars, our torpedo casings would have to be similarly reinforced. Since both Romulan and Federation torpedoes use matter/antimatter annihilation designs in their warheads, we should closely examine our respective designs to determine if there are any ways to carry additional magnetically shielded containers of antimatter reactant inside the torpedo casings to increase the amount of energy generated in the plasma pocket."

Again Kohbrah chuckled. "It seems to me that your plan assumes availability of the Talon's torpedoes," he observed.

"Circumstances force us to assume many things, Commander Kohbrah," responded Spock. "It may sound to you as though this plan was conceived by desperate madmen. I can assure you that we are not mad. However, a constantly diminishing time factor presses us ever closer to the edge of desperation. Honesty compels me to acknowledge that there are uncontrollable variables which may compromise the outcome of the plan. We anticipate losing several torpedoes in trying to penetrate the surface crust. We cannot guarantee that currents in the molten substrata will not carry torpedoes off course. And there are many other things which may go wrong. Statistically speaking, however, our chances of success increase with each torpedo that can be launched."

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, let us not mince words," suggested Kohbrah soberly. "I have been doing some mental calculations, and my numbers do not add up to a high chance of succeeding with this venture. You cannot expect me to believe that you endorse this plan because you believe it will work for the reasons you have presented. Either you are making a joke at my expense, or you are holding back some important factor from me. Which is it?"

"My people have not been joking with you, Commander," explained Kirk, "but there is a factor

involved which we have been holding back."

"Will you tell me what it is?" asked Kobrah.

"I'm sorry," said Kirk, "but I am not at liberty to go into it any further. The reason I'm even considering this plan in the first place is based upon a trust I have developed in the factor I cannot discuss. I have been given two hard pieces of fact. One is that to save my planet I must attempt to break up the body that will soon collide with it. The second fact is that this attempt must be made utilizing the resources of both our starships. I don't know if we'll succeed in breaking up that planet, but I am convinced that the galaxy cannot be kept the way it was without your help, Commander. This is all about trust. The question is: have we earned yours?"

Kobrah was quiet for what seemed like a very, very long time. He had observed that Romulans and Humans could work together. He remembered that Kirk had chosen to spare his ship. He remembered that he had learned from his history tapes how soon after his rescue the Assyrian Emperor would be assassinated. What would have happened to Ksariss and him if they had been in the company of the Emperor when that had taken place? There had been many times when Kirk, as a soundly thinking human, could have eliminated some of his Romulan problems,

if he had wanted to. The puzzling thing was that he had not yielded to that logic. Trust? Perhaps Kirk had earned a little trust.

"Well," Kohbrah finally said, "since there is at least a glimmer of a chance your plan could work, we will trust in your mysterious factor, Captain Kirk. Perhaps I might offer a suggestion. Would it be possible to phase-lock our disruptors and your phasers to drill through the planet's surface crust?"

"Aye, it would be possible," said Scott, inspired by the suggestion, "and it would leave several more torpedoes intact for detonation below the surface."

"Wonderful," smiled Kirk, "we're making progress already. Exactly how many torpedoes are we going to be able to launch?"

Kohbrah calculated for a minute before saying, "Ten from the Talon."

"...and fourteen remaining from our own stores," added Scott. "We should still have enough antimatter reactant left for safely attempting a return to our own time."

"About this time travel, Captain Kirk. My crew is very anxious to know how this is possible," said

Kohbrah.

Kirk smiled. "Mr. Spock is the man you'll want to ask later about that. He can provide you with any help and information you'll need. I can assure you it's an experience you won't want to miss. Mr. Scott, can you estimate how long it will be until we have finished enhancing those torpedoes?"

"It's going to be a 'round-the-clock job," began Scott. "It's going to take some time to figure out how to properly reinforce the casings, and that antimatter is tricky stuff to handle. With all the extra help we can get, and paying close attention to all the necessary safety procedures, and a good stiff tailwind, no sooner than forty-eight hours."

McCoy buried his head in his hands. Perhaps he should have seen it coming: they were going to go ahead with Spock's plan. There were times he seriously wondered if, on Sigma Draconis VI, he had put Spock's brain correctly back into his head.

Kirk turned to Kohbrah. "Well Commander," he said, "shall we put our people to work?"

"By all means," responded Kohbrah, rising from the table. "I believe your saying is: The sooner the better."

---- CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ----

Work began on modifying and enhancing the Enterprise's store of photon torpedoes. As there was very little he could contribute to the effort, Dr. McCoy returned to sick bay to treat a small number of minor medical issues which had been waiting there, and to check on his remaining patient, Cham Voxul, the Captain of the rogue freighter Prinche Gayul. Exactly as McCoy had expected, his injuries appeared to be nearly healed, and his vital signs remained steady and strong.

"Good news, my friend," McCoy said to him as he finished his examination, "you're just about well enough to be released. Maybe tomorrow I can authorize that, and then Captain Kirk will have to figure out what to do with you."

"I'm betting he just throws me in the brig," responded Captain Voxul sarcastically. "I've been nothing more than a prisoner while I've been here anyway."

"You probably won't be thrown into the brig,"

commented McCoy as he put away his medical scanners. "It's more likely you'll be confined to quarters."

"Still sounds like being a prisoner to me."

"You could avoid all this if we knew who you really are," explained McCoy. "Things are a little, shall we say, high security on the ship right now, and Captain Kirk isn't sure that you can be trusted. Your name hasn't been found on any database which we can access. He thinks that people who conceal their identity may have other things to hide."

"I told you before, my name isn't important, and it was never any of your business in the first place."

"You know that sooner or later we will find out who you are," McCoy pointed out.

"Fat chance of that!" laughed Captain Voxul. "From what I've heard, you're nowhere near the records you'd have to look through."

"Oh?" McCoy's eyebrows arched, "and just how do you know that?"

"I hear things..."

"Well, then, I'll have to ask people to speak softer

when they're around you," said McMoy.

"Not only that," continued Captain Voxul, "I've got a pretty good idea what all the tension is about out there."

"Oh you do, do you?" replied McCoy, showing more than polite interest.

"Absolutely!" returned Captain Voxul. "You're up to something with a bunch of Romulans. You and those Romulans are going to shoot all your photon torpedoes at some runaway planet. You're going to try blowing it up. It isn't any wonder your people are tense. The people running this ship have lost their minds!" As he spoke, a look of aggressive malevolence covered his face, and he sat up, shaking his finger intently to make the point, "And, Romulans? You can't trust them for nothing!"

"I think it's time you laid back down in your bed, friend, and forget the snippets of conversation you've overheard. If I hear of one more peep out of you about this, I'll have you quieted down with a good dose of tranquilizers," McCoy ordered sternly.

McCoy went to the outer office and cornered the nearest nurse. "Keep a closer eye on that patient," he warned, "and if he gives you any trouble, knock him

out with the biggest sedative-hypospray we've got and call Security."

McCoy strode out into the empty corridor to think a few things through. His patient certainly seemed to have a reason to dislike Romulans, and it appeared that he could get himself worked up enough to do something about it. With the possibility that there could be an occasional Romulan aboard the Enterprise, at least until Kirk was finished pruning the undesirable planets from the solar system, it might be wise to have Security keep an eye on Captain Voxul. McCoy decided that he would request that, and then report his misgivings to Captain Kirk.

Lying in his bed, Captain Voxul quietly pulled on a chain around his neck, eventually bringing a small featureless plastic rectangle out the neck of his shirt. He was in no hurry to return home. He couldn't, actually. If enforcers from the syndicate ever found him, they would extract a terrible penalty from him for losing the syndicate's shipment of gemstones. It was the Romulans, really, who had all but ended his life in the twenty-third century. He turned the plastic rectangle over several times, smiling broadly and admiring it with profound reverence. Then his face became very grim, and blueprints of vengeance began to pirouette through his mind.

* * *

Chief Engineer Scott had been correct. The entire process of preparing the modified torpedoes and familiarizing the launch crews with procedural revisions had taken the entire forty-eight hours. During this time both ships had traveled under impulse power to the red planet and had assumed stationary orbits over a site where the Enterprise's narrow-beam phasers and the Talon's disruptors would together cut a targeting hole through the planet's thin crust. After establishing the breach in the crust, the twenty-four enhanced torpedoes would be launched from both ships toward the core of the planet. Both ships would then swiftly withdraw, for if the procedure worked as planned, there would be devastating waves of radiation and electromagnetic effects.

News of the progress of the final preparations surged through both ships in great swells, and eddy currents of information, offshoots of the main flow, worked their ways into all departments.

Eventually the information that the Enterprise's torpedoes were set for imminent launch flowed into sick bay. A frustrated medical technician complained, "They're ready to start the five-minute countdown. I wish we could hear what's going on! If it wasn't for that patient in recovery, Captain Kirk would've piped it through the whole ship."

"Quiet, Ensign," admonished a supervising technician, "or I'll have to put you on report."

* * *

With his eyes riveted to the planet on the viewscreen, Kirk solemnly said, "Lt. Uhura, open a channel to the Talon."

"Yes, Captain Kirk?" replied the voice of Commander Kohbrah, carried only on audio because the viewscreens on both ships were dedicated to video monitoring of what would unfold on the planet below.

With the countdown clock ticking away, Kirk asked, "Are you ready to commence, Commander?"

"We were waiting for you, Captain Kirk. After all, it is your solar system," quipped Kohbrah.

"So it is," agreed Kirk, "but, please, be our guest anyway."

* * *

"Nurse! Nurse!! Gees, what kind of hospital is this?" thundered the Prinche Gayul's Captain.

A pretty, petite, medical technician scurried into the recovery room, quite concerned by the patient's sudden outburst. "Whatever is the matter?" she inquired as she approached his bedside.

In a veritable instant Captain Voxul's hands were clamped around her neck, and he twisted himself up and around her, forcing her to lean back across the edge of the bed. "Make one little squeak and I'll crush

your windpipe," he scowled.

Fearfully she nodded her assent. Voxul then spun her around, drawing his crooked arm tightly under her chin and pressing forward on the back of her head with his other forearm. "New rules," he smiled wickedly, "do what I say or I break your pretty neck."

"OK," she managed in a croaking whisper.

"Head for the door," Voxul instructed, "and take it easy."

Clumsily they scuffled toward the door, the unexpected sounds attracting the attention of one of the security guards assigned to watch Captain Voxul. The guard froze for an instant, and then reacted by drawing his phaser and calling to a second security guard who also brought up his phaser.

"I want both of those hand phasers sliding across the floor toward the lady's feet. NOW!" ordered Captain Voxul.

Seeing the terror in the med technician's eyes, both security guards complied.

"Good," smiled Captain Voxul. Then he said to his hostage, "Now, sweetheart, we're going to bend down, slowly, and you are going to pick up both those

weapons by anything but the handles and hold them very delicately out in front of you."

Carefully, the two lowered themselves toward the floor with Captain Voxul maintaining a constant pressure against her neck. The med technician awkwardly groped for the weapons, and when she found them she cautiously turned them so that when she picked them up, she would not be holding them by anything that could cause one to discharge.

Slowly Captain Voxul drew his hostage back to her feet as she held the two phasers as far in front of herself as she could manage. "Very good," complimented Voxul. "Now, I'm going to take my right hand away from your head so that you can slowly hand me the phaser in your right hand. No tricks now, because I know a couple of ways to snap a neck with one arm as efficiently as with two."

Slowly she brought the right hand phaser over her shoulder, holding it lightly up-side-down. Captain Voxul took it, checked its setting, and pressed it against the back of her head. "Alright," smiled Captain Voxul, "now the one in your left hand, to your right hand, and back to me just like the first one."

When the second weapon was being passed over the hostage's right shoulder, Captain Voxul inserted

the first one into his belt and accepted the one he was being given. He relaxed his hold on his hostage's neck, but did not release her.

"You're staying with me for a while," he whispered into her ear. Then, waving the phaser toward the door of the recovery room, he instructed, "Everybody else, in there."

When everyone in the outer office had filed into the recovery room, Captain Voxul ordered, "One of you onto each of these beds."

As the new hostages were complying with the Voxul's latest instructions, he whispered into the med technician's ear, "OK, sweetheart, you're the nurse. I want each of these patients restrained, real tight. If I don't see pain on their faces when you pull those belts tight, you're in big trouble!"

Apprehensively she approached the first bed and began applying the bed's restraints to the security guard lying on it. Several times she apologized for overtightening, but she was forbidden by Voxul to adjust anything once it was fastened. In ten minutes she had secured the last hostage. Captain Voxul then swung his left arm around her neck and steered her toward the main sick bay door, explaining, "Now, we're just going for a little walk."

* * *

Kohbrah's eyes were fixed upon his viewscreen as he said, "Give me a final system's report."

"All readouts are within acceptable parameters, Commander."

"Excellent. What does the telemetry from the Enterprise look like?"

"There are no problems from the Enterprise, Commander."

"Then we are ready for the first phase," affirmed Kohbrah. "Attention, both ships. Phasers and disruptors, commence firing."

Romulan disruptors and the Enterprise's narrow-beam phasers unleashed their combined energies onto the selected spot on the planet's surface. Within a matter of seconds a seething pool of molten crust had appeared around the target area, and the Starships' energy beams continued boring into the

planet. Many minutes passed as engineering teams on the Enterprise and the Talon monitored the progress of the drilling while other technicians nervously watched indicators of the performance of the weapons systems which were providing output in excess of their design expectations.

"We have successfully penetrated the planet's crust," announced Spock.

"We're through the crust," repeated Kirk for the benefit of Kohbrah and his crew. "Cease firing phasers and disruptors,"

When the viewscreen showed that the preliminary bombardment phase had been terminated, Kirk ordered, "Prepare to fire, Mr. Chekov."

"Ready, Sir."

"Mr. Chekov, fire torpedo number one."

A bright sparkle of light from the torpedo's propulsion jets receded from the Enterprise, homing in perfectly on the boiling breach in the planet's crust. It was followed by the first torpedo from the Talon.

"Mr. Chekov, fire number two. Fire number three..."

As Kirk's firing orders were matched by alternating

launches from the Talon, twenty torpedoes - ten from each ship - headed for the planet. These twenty were followed by the remaining four torpedoes launched solely from the Enterprise. From their collective observation points, the receding lights were well on their way to merging into a single line, forming a sparkling lance which would hopefully pierce into the heart of the planet.

Unexpectedly the turbolift doors hissed open, and the Captain of the *Prinche Gayul* burst onto the bridge with a phaser in one hand and a terrified female med technician restrained by his other arm around her neck.

Captain Gayul quickly leveled his phaser at Spock and ordered, "You - Vulcan! Away from that station!"

"Do it, Spock," Kirk quietly added, "that phaser is set to kill."

Spock edged away from the science station as Gayul's phaser continued motioning him farther back. As he was moving Kirk asked, "What do you want on my bridge?"

Turning to Kirk, Captain Gayul smiled and replied, "Justice - my way, Captain Kirk. I intend to even a score."

Captain Gayul pulled his hostage along the ring of stations until he was able to throw her into Spock's chair. He reached into the neck of his shirt and withdrew the plastic rectangle, removed it from its clasp, and inserted it into the tape port of the science station computer. As he was doing this, Spock was able to subtly edge a step closer to him.

Hoping to give Spock as much help as possible, Kirk drew Captain Gayul's attention to himself. "Just what do you think you're doing to my science computer?" he demanded.

"He's using a "cheater", Captain," said Lt. Commander Scott from his engineering station to the right of the turbolift. "It's probably got magnetic pulse interfacing. It'll figure out how to communicate with our computers and bypass security lockouts, giving him access to most of the systems."

"Hasn't this technology been discouraged by nearly every culture that uses computers?" asked Kirk.

"Aye, it has," Scott agreed as Spock moved another step closer to his station, "but that usually means only the bad guys have them."

During Kirk and Scott's exchange Captain Gayul had been entering information and commands to the

bridge computers through Spock's science station terminal. He had completely ignored everything which had been said, and apparently had not noticed Spock's slow progress back toward him.

Suddenly Captain Gayul thrust an arm into the air and triumphantly proclaimed, "Aha, success!" Spock froze, apparently still not perceived as a threat. As Captain Gayul looked at Kirk, his smug grin very much resembled the look of a terran housecat that had just gorged itself on a member of its favorite avian species.

"I'd like you to know, Captain," he bragged to Kirk, "that I have been a very busy person during my convalescence. Thanks to my cheater, as you call it, I have managed to look into the darkest corners of your computer memory banks, and I have diligently kept abreast of the development of this little adventure of yours. Thanks to your Romulan friends destroying my ship and its cargo I'm virtually a dead man if I ever return home, so you can see they owe me some restitution. I have just fed into the computers the programming access codes of one of your photon torpedoes, along with its new target. You see, after reading your Starfleet assessments of the latest Romulan warships, I discovered a potential weakness in their shielding. Thanks to these hotted up torpedoes you've built I can now cripple that Romulan

ship enough that it'll never stand up to a time trip home! I have just taken control of one of your last photon torpedoes and have targeted it on that Romulan warship!"

Kirk looked to Spock, demanding, "Can you still send its destruct code from your station?"

"Not so fast!" shouted Captain Gayul, raising his hand phaser toward Spock. "There'll be no destruct codes sent from this station!"

The sound of running footsteps behind him distracted Gayul. He turned in time to see Lt. Commander Scott sprint into the turbolift and close the doors. As the turbolift began to descend the Gayul fired at the doors, charring their surface and sending a shower of glowing sparks across the stations on the left side of the bridge. Cursing, he spun around to check on Spock who was beginning a lunge at him. He fired his phaser, the beam striking the curved upper level railing and sending more sparks throughout the bridge.

Spock reeled around to his right, holding his right hand which had been on the railing behind where the phaser beam had struck. When he stopped, he was leaning against the wall between two station consoles.

"Get over here Vulcan," growled Captain Gayul angrily, "and shut down power to that turbolift!"

"That will take some time..." Spock distinctly said.

He's stalling for time, Kirk thought to himself.

Captain Gayul screamed and fired his phaser into the floor thrice, causing Spock to throw his arms up to protect his eyes. "Don't explain it - just do it!!" he screamed at Spock.

"As you wish. I shall endeavor to comply with your requests," Spock conceded. He walked to the science station chair and said to the med technician still sitting there, "Would you excuse me, Ensign?"

She stood and watched as Spock carefully cut power to the bridge turbolift, which had long before stopped its descent.

Spock started to turn his head but was stopped by the barrel of the freighter Captain's hand phaser. "I ought to ventilate your fool head!" he threatened. "A little fresh air in there might make it work faster!"

"Captain, on the main viewscreen," called Sulu from his forward station.

Kirk and everyone else turned to watch the forward

viewscreen which now showed the receding Romulan warship Talon, which had been withdrawing from its firing position near Mars as soon as it had launched its last torpedo. Closing in on it was a sparkling point of light – Captain Gayul's reprogrammed photon torpedo.

"Warn them..." shouted Kirk.

The sounds of a desperate struggle near the science station drew his attention there. Captain Gayul, the medical technician and Spock presented a jumbled mass of limbs as they grappled, and the security personnel already on duty on the bridge rushed to assist. Kirk returned to the drama on the viewscreen in time to see a blinding explosion occur behind the Talon. He turned back toward the science station to see that Captain Gayul was incapacitatingly restrained.

As he looked more closely around the battered bridge, Kirk felt that something, or someone, important was missing. "Where is Mr. Scott?" he demanded.

In answer to his question, the turbolift came to life, ascending toward the main bridge. When the doors opened, Lt. Commander Scott emerged.

"Explain yourself, Mr. Scott!" ordered Kirk.

"I went to the auxiliary bridge, Sir, and sent the destruct order to that runaway torpedo!" responded Scott as if to imply there was no logical reason Captain Kirk should be upset with him.

"Kirk!" boomed the voice of Kohbrah on the main viewscreen. "What is the meaning of that torpedo exploding behind my ship?"

"Uh, there was...a malfunction, Commander," Kirk stammered as he improvised. "We had to destroy it."

"You certainly took your time!" Kohbrah scolded. "I should think you would have been more careful."

"I intend to be much more careful, Commander," replied Kirk. "Please accept my apologies."

"Apologize later, Kirk. Get moving before that exploding planet beats you out here!"

"Take us out of here, Mr. Sulu. Full impulse!" ordered Kirk. "Mr. Chekov, take the science station. Pay close attention to the sensors. I want to know what's going on down there."

As they raced away from the red planet, Chekov returned the viewscreen display to the planet's target

site and reported, "All remaining torpedoes have detonated below the surface, Captain."

"Have we achieved the chain reaction?" demanded Kirk.

"Impossible to tell yet," answered Chekov. "I read increased tectonic activity, most likely a result of detonation shock waves. There is a measurable increase in heat generated. The effect seems to be spreading."

A chorus of cheers swept around the bridge which was reinforced by other cheers heard on ship-wide intercom. Kirk watched the viewscreen intently, suddenly aware that he was fiercely gripping the back of his command chair, virtually reaching out with the force of his will to make the crazy long-shot scheme work.

The bright molten area around the torpedo target site grew wider, while the colors of the boiling lava soup changed from dark reds and blacks to more resplendent hues. The effect continued to spread, accelerating, and then, mysteriously, not quite so rapidly.

Long additional seconds passed, until eventually the expansion stopped. The surface, at first slowly,

then at an increasing rate, began to darken.

"Mr. Chekov, what's going on?" demanded Kirk, desperately searching his memory for some quick action to keep what they had achieved from gushing down the sewer.

"The reaction area is cooling, Sir. The anticipated chain reaction...did not initialize."

The euphoria of moments past had been replaced by shock and silence. Kirk left the command chair, and looking over his shoulder at the viewscreen, made his way to the science station. There he examined the instruments.

"What...happened?" he quietly asked.

Spock, who had been standing near the turbolift nursing his injured hand, returned to the science station, attempting to help analyze the data which had been recorded.

"Captain Kirk...?"

Kirk turned around to see Commander Kohbrah on the viewscreen. "Captain Kirk, please accept our regrets. It was a most commendable effort."

Suddenly, below the forward viewscreen stood

Trelane, sporting a delighted smile, and arrayed in the frilly formal attire of a late eighteenth-century French aristocrat. He was as he had first appeared on Gothos - the consummate Squire at leisure.

"Why, there you are, Captain Kirk. Et mon Dieu! What have you been trying to do?"

---- CHAPTER EIGHTEEN ----

Trelane strutted pretentiously around the bridge, delighted with the enticing discoveries he was making. He closely examined the forward viewscreen display. With great, broadly feigned concern he scrutinized the readings and settings at the navigation and helm console. On his way to the science station he stopped and examined the phaser damage to the safety railing, clicking his tongue reproachfully as he glanced at Kirk. At the science station he peered quietly at Spock's work. Chekov angrily glanced askance at Kirk, while Spock impassively continued his investigations. Trelane finally paid a visit to Uhura's communications station. He playfully tickled her under her chin, and she smartly pushed his hand away.

Again delighted, Trelane sought out Kirk and remarked, "She is truly an outstanding gem among the Nubian treasures, Captain. So pretty, and so spirited!"

Kirk quickly interposed himself between Trelane and Uhura. "Trelane, you are bothering my crew members. Leave my ship!" he ordered.

"You have been a naughty boy, Captain Kirk," smiled Trelane, descending into the command well and standing beside Kirk's chair. "You still try to change the rules to my games. When will you learn that rules are my job? Your job is to play out your assigned part."

"You mean all we have to do is perform on your stage, solely for your amusement?" objected Kirk. "Sorry, Trelane, there's more to it than that. As sentient beings we have rights..."

"You have only what I allow you to have, Captain Kirk. I outrank you. I am your superior officer."

"You are no Starfleet officer, and you do not outrank me!"

"Touché, a point well taken, my Captain," observed Trelane, flippantly emphasizing the point with an index finger, "but you cannot dispute that I am still

your superior!"

The opening of the bridge turbolift doors interrupted Trelane's pontificating, and he stood, jaw agape, as a sleek black cat trotted briskly onto the bridge and began in a most endearing and beguiling manner to rub itself against Trelane's ankles. The novel experience initially delighted Trelane, until he began to sneeze. With increasing frequency and ferocity the sneezing overwhelmed him, and it became all that he could do. He tried in vain to distance himself from the creature, but its footwork and persistence proved superior.

With everyone's attention focused on Trelane and his feline vexation, no one noticed the quiet appearance of the white orb over the turbolift doors. While Trelane and the cat had raced about the bridge, it had traveled aloft, eventually hovering over Trelane.

A deep, feminine voice emanating from the orb gently spoke to Trelane. "Where have you been, Trelane?"

Trelane froze. His eyes darted from side to side, and then upward. Meanwhile, the black cat slinked back into the turbolift.

"Mother?" he questioned in a tiny voice.

"Yes, Trelane. I have been looking for you again. I have called for you several times. Why did you not respond?"

Trelane bent precariously backward, facing upward at the Mother orb. "I had this really fine game underway, Mother," he explained with nervous enthusiasm. "I guess I didn't hear you because of all the noise we were making..?."

"Yes," the Mother orb agreed, "So much noise. It seems I can always find you at the source of your greatest volumes of noise. Just what sort of game have you invented this time, Trelane?"

"For a while..." said Trelane, "... I think it was sort of a war game simulation...?" As he had spoken, Trelane's voice had risen in pitch, posing an innocent-sounding possibility he had fervently hoped his mother would go along with.

"Trelane, you know that what you are doing here is very much against your father's and my wishes! This activity is much more involved than a simulation. In violation of your standing restrictions you are again using live creatures in your games, and you have been explicitly forbidden to ever again bother The Kirk and its Enterprise."

On the verge of tears, Trelane became furious with the Mother orb. "You're ruining things again!" he screamed. Hammering with clenched fists and stomping his foot for emphasis he added, "You're always spoiling my fun! Always, always, always!"

The Mother orb descended from the ceiling, hovering before Kirk. When it spoke it was quite frustrated. "I apologize for my son, Captain Kirk. It appears that raising a child will never become easier."

"I appreciate your apology," said Kirk diplomatically, but he added earnestly, "however, an apology alone won't repair the damage and harm that will be inflicted when those two planets collide."

"Are the two planets important to you?" inquired the Mother orb.

"Yes, because most of my crew will begin their lives on them in about three thousand years," Kirk explained.

The Mother orb moved briskly back toward Trelane and hovered imposingly over him. "Trelane, what else have you done besides forcing these creatures to participate in your 'games'?" it demanded. "It now seems that you have also unnaturally disrupted the stability of a life-bearing star system!"

As Trelane stammered incoherently, the turbolift doors again opened and Ensign Sabat stepped out, no longer dressed in his Starfleet uniform, but in a black, formal suit, fastened at the neck and showing razor-sharp creases in the coat sleeves and trouser legs. The only apparent embellishment on the garment was a tiny golden laid-over figure eight, and infinity symbol, Kirk realized, which was fastened to the apex of the left lapel on the small collar.

"Excuse me, but perhaps we could best explain the problem," offered Sabat.

A slender woman, with long, silky black hair and wearing a full-length, sheer black gown, stepped out of the turbolift and stood with Sabat. A small golden pin, an exact duplicate of the one worn by Sabat, was fastened to her garment's left breast.

"Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, you remember my associate, Isis?" said Sabat by way of introduction.

The Mother orb now hovered before Isis and Sabat. "I am familiar with the function of those whom you represent. Please, tell me, what exactly has my son done?"

"Captain Kirk," asked Sabat, "may we borrow your briefing room for a short time? I am sure that once

the facts have been presented to the parent, we will be able to bring everything back under control."

"The briefing room is yours to use," said Kirk. "Will you require anything else?"

"No, we just need a quiet place to talk to Trelane and his parent," said Sabat. "When we find out how he caused all these events to occur, we may be able to affect a 'seamless repair' to the stretched fabric of time."

As if reacting to a cue, Isis entered the turbolift. She was followed closely by the Mother orb. Sabat went to the turbolift and stood in the open door, waiting, watching Trelane along with Isis as if the next important move was his.

Kirk slid behind Trelane and leaned forward to whisper in his ear, "I believe they are waiting for you."

Trelane rewarded Kirk's unsolicited insight with an intense icy glare. Then, composing himself, he resumed his role of nobleman Squire Trelane. Claspng his hands behind his back, and standing proudly erect, he walked pontifically to the turbolift and joined those who waited for him. The doors closed, and the turbolift departed for a lower deck. Silence held the bridge for a moment, then Uhura

noticed that the Talon had been attempting to contact the Enterprise. She channeled everything to the viewscreen.

"Captain Kirk," implored the weary face of Commander Kohbrah, "I have been trying for the last ten minutes to raise you. What so occupies you over there?"

Somberly, Kirk responded to Kohbrah , " Things have just... taken a turn for the better, Commander Kohbrah."

* * *

An hour later Sabat and Isis, as the black cat, returned to the bridge. "I need another favor, Captain Kirk," said Sabat.

"Just name it," replied Kirk.

"The use of your transporter for one last time," Sabat explained. "Trelane revealed where he has hidden the devices he used to create this miscarriage of history. It seems that everything he has done can still be set right. Isis and I will see to that. All of you

and the Romulans can be returned to your own time. We recommend that this be done as soon as possible."

"I remember getting quite a headache from the last trip I took under the influence of those devices," Kirk related.

"That was caused by misusing one of Trelane's devices for concurrent time and spacial displacements. The device is not at its best in attempting both together. If we displace you through time and limit your spacial displacement, you will arrive at approximately these same coordinates in your twenty-third century with no ill effects."

"It sounds easy enough," said Kirk. "What will you require from our transporter?"

"I will program it with the location of the devices," said Sabat. "This information will be erased from your computers upon our safe arrival at our destination. Then Isis and I will use the devices to repair the time damage and send you home."

"What will happen to Trelane?" Kirk asked.

"That matter is out of your hands," replied Sabat, "although I have been assured that much more intensive monitoring and other corrective measures

are in store. There was also a mention of possibly an extra-familiar counselor, or mentor... but I drift away from things I must yet accomplish. I need to go to the transporter room now, and you should advise both your ships to prepare for the return to your own time."

"There is one last thing that bothers me," said Kirk. "This wild plan of yours to blow up our errant planet, was it ever supposed to work?"

"I think it served its purpose very well, don't you?" responded Sabat.

Kirk smiled. "Thanks for everything, Ensign," he said, offering his hand.

"My pleasure, Admiral," Sabat smiled as he clasped Kirk's hand.

Sabat entered the turbolift and waited as Isis gracefully followed after him. The door closed, and then they were gone.

A moment later Kirk said to Uhura, "Get me Commander Kohbrah on the Talon."

After a short pause Kohbrah appeared on the viewscreen. "Have you decided to dole out another item of news, Captain Kirk?"

"The one you have been waiting for," smiled Kirk.
"Prepare yourselves. We are going home."

* * *

There was a brief flicker, an instant of disorientation. Suddenly the communications channels were flooded with activity.

"...please identify..."

"Repeat...this is the U.S.S. Enterprise," replied Uhura slowly.

"What happened to you, Enterprise. You seemed to just fall off the grid for a few minutes. Hold one minute...we're picking up another vessel with you. Can you help identify it?"

"That would be a Romulan Bird Of Prey named The Talon," said Uhura.

"Romulan? Repeat that, Enterprise. Do we have an undocumented Romulan warship in the Terran star system?"

Uhura's attention was drawn to another opening

channel in which Kirk would be interested.

"Commander Kohbrah for you, Sir," she announced.

"On screen, Lieutenant."

"Captain Kirk, I hate to save your planet and then just dash off, but now that we are home, so to speak, things have to be as they were. Duty, you understand."

"I do understand," replied Kirk, "and I am likewise bound by duty to request that you surrender Ambassador Ksariss to us. If you comply, you will be safely escorted to the Neutral Zone."

"I'm sorry, but I cannot do that, Kirk. Duty says that while I have her, I must try to escape."

"If that's the way it must be, good luck, Commander Kohbrah," said Kirk.

"And to you, Captain Kirk."

The Talon started a fast turn away from the Enterprise, becoming invisible and speeding away.

"I am tracking them," announced Spock.

"Helm, take us after them, and don't lose them this time!" ordered Kirk.

"Captain," said Uhura, "Starfleet reports they are massing a cluster of ships ahead of the Talon to block its escape."

Kirk acknowledged her information and then studied the tactical display on the forward viewscreen. The chase continued for another ten minutes before the positions of the intercepting Federation ships began showing up on the display. Apparently the Talon also detected the additional Starfleet vessels. It dropped out of warp, eventually decloaking and coming to a complete stop. When Kirk ordered the Enterprise to close within phaser range of the Talon, the Romulan ship was boxed in, with virtually no hope of escape.

As Kirk was wondering what Kohbrah would try next, Uhura announced, "Captain, Commander Kohbrah would like to speak to you."

"Let's hear what he has to say, Lieutenant."

Commander Kohbrah appeared on the viewscreen with Ambassador Ksariss at his side. "It appears we have both satisfied the requirements of our duty, haven't we, Kirk?" observed Kohbrah.

"It was...a most commendable effort," replied Kirk.

"My tactical display indicates that my present situation is essentially hopeless," said Kohbrah.

"I have to agree," said Kirk. "If you would like, I could have my First Officer compute your chances of escape."

"That will not be necessary, Captain," said Kohbrah. "In view of your surprising display of superior numbers, I am prepared to surrender Ambassador Ksariss."

"You...!" exclaimed Ksariss as she drew back to strike Kohbrah. Her hand swung wide. Kohbrah thrust his arm upward and easily blocked the blow. He then turned to walk away from her as two security guards took her firmly by the arms and hustled her again toward the bridge exit.

As the trio reached the exit, Ksariss said to the security guards, "One moment..." They permitted her to turn around.

"This is nothing more than petty revenge, Turin!" she cried.

Kohbrah permitted himself the smallest of smiles: the insufferable shrew had actually used his given name. And there had been a wavering quality in her

voice that suggested she had been crying.

Imagine that, thought Kobrah. Ksariss, crying...

"Perhaps it is little more than petty revenge, Ambassador," responded Kohbrah without turning to face her, "but it should be comforting for you to know that it was served to you exquisitely cold."

---- EPILOG ----

In due course, Ksariss was delivered to the Bantam-Brooks Penal Facility without further incident. The anticipated torrent of protests from the Romulan Government never materialized. It was as if the Romulans were officially disavowing any knowledge of, or interest in the woman. It was with profound relief that Starfleet officials encountered news segment titles such as WOMAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY, presented almost as afterthoughts throughout the media. They proved to be the dying embers of the Ksariss story.

The missing transport ship, and all the missing trial witnesses it had been carrying, mysteriously appeared in orbit around KetrIDGE Alpha, a surprise which

inspired base commander Commodore Barry to press even harder for the security improvements he felt his base required.

After delivering Ksariss to Bantam-Brooks, the Enterprise was assigned a final mission before reporting to spacedock, ferrying a group of minor diplomats and officials back to Earth for reassignment. An hour away from the scheduled rendezvous with the orbiting repair facility Captain James Kirk was in his quarters halfheartedly packing some of the few possessions he had allowed to become a permanent part of his life. He had just closed a box when he heard someone at the door. "Enter," he said, searching for another box he had tossed somewhere nearby.

McCoy entered holding a small bottle and two of the glasses he always replicated when he felt that an occasion required commemoration.

"Donated by Scotty, Jim," McCoy smiled. "It looks like this'll be our last drink together on the Enterprise," he said while pouring a discreet amount from the bottle into the two glasses and handing one to Kirk, "at least for a while."

Kirk smiled halfheartedly, realizing that what he had to say to McCoy would not come out easily. "It

will be our last one together on the Enterprise for a long time, Bones. I've scheduled my appointment with the promotion review board."

McCoy set his glass on the table and replied, "You know how I feel about you and this promotion. You're not ready to fly a desk. Don't you have any desire to get back out there and see what's to be discovered yet?"

Kirk thought it over, acknowledging to himself that another five-year assignment exploring the vast unknown would be fun. Perhaps the immense satisfaction he had expected to derive from a career in Starfleet had been the main reason he had enrolled in the Academy. Indeed, the career to this point, and especially the ending five-year mission had delivered immense satisfaction, but perhaps additional starship command assignments were not part of his destiny. He was again visited by the memory of Sabat addressing him as 'Admiral' before he sent them home. Had that been a discreet revelation, or a warning? Should he surrender to his apparent destiny, go with the flow, or attempt to sidestep the impending uncomfortable leap into his future and relive the satisfactions of the past? As tempting as that was, he could not deny that time relentlessly conveyed all things to their indelible fortunes.

Kirk picked up McCoy's glass and handed it to him. "I've seen my future, Bones, and the path I must travel. Let's have this last drink together, for the good times."

McCoy swallowed hard, and finally said, "You always were one to rush in where angels feared to tread. Someday you'll see that I was right. You won't be happy playing Admiral. But," he added, raising his glass, "I'll drink to the good times."

There was a ringing clink, followed by a burning wash that celebrated and cemented a friendship.

Finally McCoy put down his glass and said, "I've got to go, Captain. I believe it's about time you were on the bridge to bring this battered bucket of bolts in for its overhaul."

"Thanks, Bones," Kirk smiled as McCoy hurried through his door. The Doctor had been right. He should be on his way to the bridge. He stared for a moment at the door to his quarters, at the moment closed and protecting him from the future. When it opened again, nothing would ever be the same.

THE END