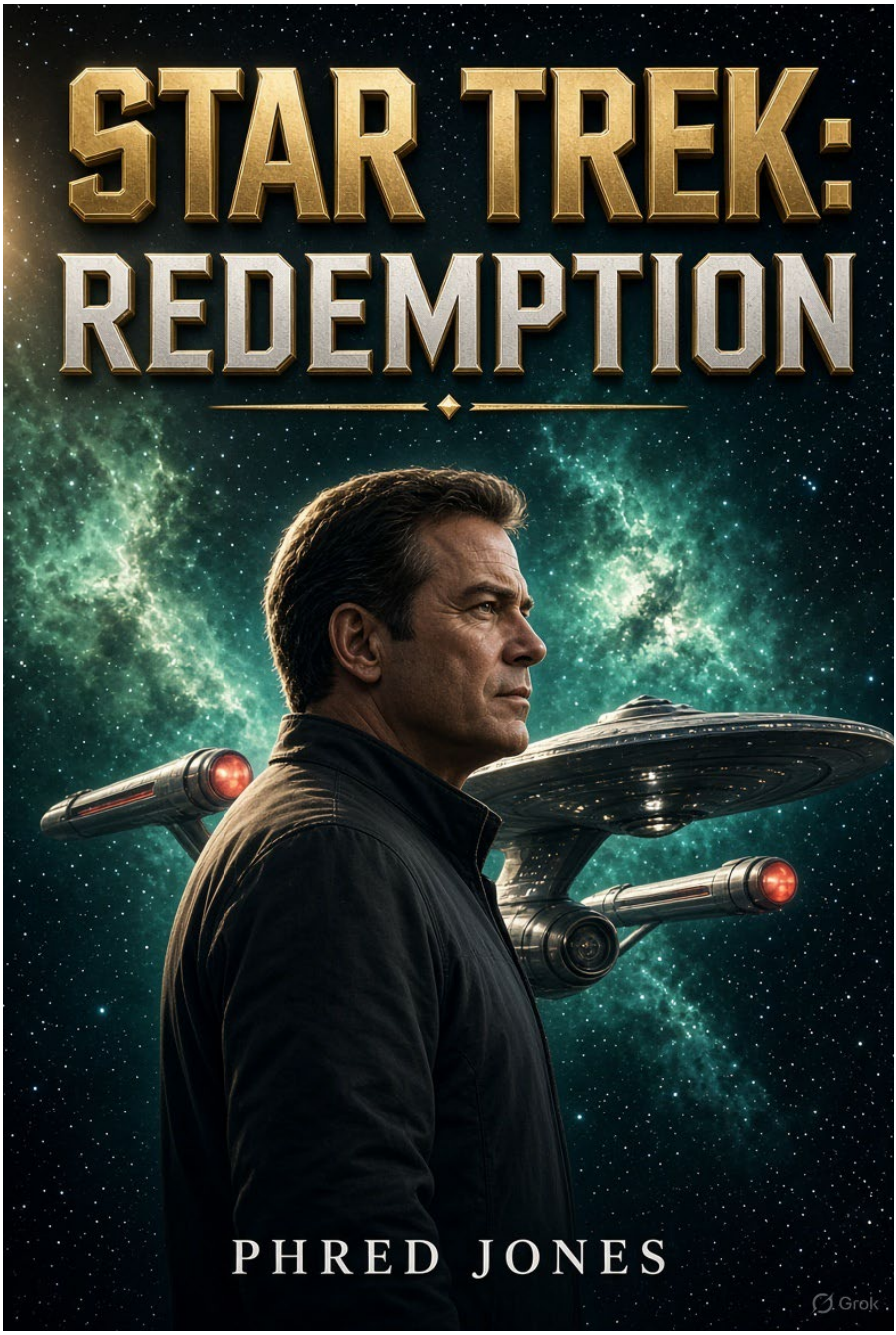
STAR TREK:
REDEMPTION
PHRED JONES
Grok

STAR TREK: REDEMPTION

By Phred Jones

Historian's Note

This story takes place after the successful rescue of Spock and in place of the movie "The Voyage Home". Kirk has stolen the ENTERPRISE and destroyed her in his efforts to find Spock. David, his son, has died on Genesis. Kirk and crew are on Vulcan where Fal Tor Pan has been successfully performed and Spock's new body now has his old mind and Spock is being retrained in the Vulcan disciplines. Kirk has the stolen Klingon ship in place of the ENTERPRISE and has just completed repairs to it so he can return to Star Fleet.

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Chapter One

James T. Kirk wiped the sweat from his brow as he surveyed the arid Vulcan landscape. Eyes squinted against the harsh light, he could make out the last of the ground transports bringing the supplies for the ship as they snaked across the valley of red sand.

He turned and idly brushed at his sleeve at the fine layer of dust that coated everything and seemed to permeate his very soul. It was with more than a little uneasiness that he contemplated their return to Star Fleet.

He watched as Scotty guided one of the helpful Vulcan shipwrights in the repair of a landing pod. Without the Vulcans help, they might have been many months getting the rusty old ship in good order. But even with their unquestionable assistance, Scott still spent much of his time making sure that things were done his way, plain and simple repairs, instead of the numerous upgrades the Vulcans seemed set on installing.

To the Vulcan mind, as long as it had to be done anyway, why not use the most current available replacement equipment? An excellent way of doing things normally. But not for a vessel that needed only to go to Earth. Either the shipyard on Earth would swarm over it, prying all its secrets from the enemy design, or it would be given back to the Klingons. In either case, minimum use of equipment was indicated. Scott was managing to get it his way, but it was a constant battle.

Kirk turned again as McCoy crunched his way through the loose rocks to his side. Kirk's quick glance took in the lined face and empty eyes. Since Spock's katra had been removed from McCoy's active mind, McCoy had been undergoing lessons from the Vulcan adepts to learn to shunt aside the occasional cross-circuit in his brain from two different memories. The strain on him was obvious from his always-furrowed brow and his dampened spirit. Only recently had his old fire returned in some small measure.

McCoy wiped at the sweat and grime coating his neck and face with a large red bandanna and squinted at Kirk. "I thought

we were leaving this place today?" He gestured at Scotty and the just arriving supplies. "Looks like we're in the middle of everything instead of at the end!"

"And `GOOD MORNING' to you, too, Doctor."

McCoy's brow creased even more as he squinted at Kirk's face to read his mood. "All I can say is that MY supplies have been aboard for a week. And I have refurbished what the Klingons call a sickbay into a passable imitation of a first aid center." He swiped again at his face. "Dammit, Jim. I want out of this place before those Vulcan head mechanics convince me I LIKE it here."

Kirk had to grin. "Small chance of that, Bones. I think all of us will be happy to get back to Earth again." His small smile faded at the thought and McCoy was quick to pick up on it.

"What's the latest word from Star Fleet?"

Kirk's anger was transmitted easily by his stiffened body and tightened jaw. "Word? There is no `word', Bones. I've tried frontal assaults, back doors, everything. People I have known for years are suddenly too busy to even pass the time of day. And the OFFICIAL word is even worse. An hour's worth of demands, wheedles and whatever boiled down to `Let us know when you get back'".

McCoy winced. For the majority of the people at Star Fleet to be shunting Jim Kirk aside meant that the real word was out. *Avoid this one like the plague.* Aside from the formality of a court martial, it looked like they were already convicted. He couldn't help but wonder just how bad it would actually be.

Suddenly Kirk's face hardened and his back straightened. McCoy had seen THAT look before. So he was prepared when Kirk turned and swiftly started for the main hatch. McCoy smiled for the first time in weeks and quickly followed behind him.

The last hour had seen the bulk of the supplies loaded aboard, inventoried and stowed. Maintenance crews had completed their last-minute chores, picked up their tools and departed the ship. Ground crews had policed the area around the ship removing replaced, unused and abandoned parts. Now the command crew was assembled on the bridge of the Klingon ship.

Kirk paced angrily back and forth for a moment after Scotty came in to report the departure of all the helpers.

Finally he turned to face them and they all gave him their undivided attention. "When we started off on this, I had envisioned a short cruise and a successful conclusion. I did not foresee the events that forced us to abandon and destroy our ship and end up on Vulcan."

His voice had broken slightly and each of them recalled the death of Kirk's son, David, at the hands of the Klingons, even though he hadn't mentioned it. "The point is that now we are about to return to Earth. And I'm not happy about the reception we are liable to get. The responsibility is mine ..."

"Pardon me, Admiral." Sulu broke in. "The responsibility is OURS. When you found out about Spock, we all made up our own minds to accompany you in search of our comrade. We went with you because we wanted to support you. The responsibility belongs to each of us. With all respect, Admiral."

Kirk eyed Sulu's firm countenance a moment and then looked to each of the others. All nodded briefly in support of Sulu's words and feelings. Kirk nodded to himself and showed them a small, sad smile. "Thank you. Now let's get this relic back into space where it belongs! Posts!" Only McCoy was close enough to hear him mutter. "Where WE belong. Even if for only one last time."

The normalcy of routine became the feeling of the moment as everyone manned their posts and powered up systems and reported readiness to Kirk. McCoy stood at the side of Kirk's command chair and watched and listened.

Good-byes had already been spoken at the dinner last night at Ambassador Sarek's home. After a final check with Vulcan space control, the ship lifted gently and sped the harsh atmosphere for the comforting dark of space. Each followed the demands of their job, immersing themselves in the somewhat altered routine.

Kirk sat alone in the center seat, determination written on every feature. HE would bear the burden of responsibility. If he had to use every last favor owed him, his crew would not be punished for supporting his actions.

The ship circled the planet once and slipped into warp without a sound.

Chapter Two
"Waiting"

Kirk toweled his hair dry and paused at the small mirror over the dresser. ***Two months.*** Two long, dreary, dead months. The tired face in the mirror had no answers although he had asked it often enough.

He glanced at the door as he heard the barely audible exchange between his guards, sounds he would not have heard if he had been asleep. His gaze drifted over the chronometer above the desk to confirm that it was morning shift change. Except for the constant guard, he had normal access to the considerable facilities of Star Fleet Command.

He realized that a decision of sorts had been made somewhere. He alone had recently been placed under twenty-four-hour guard. The others were reminded to stay within the facilities but not guarded. At least not ***overtly*** guarded. It was a minor victory and one that he had worked hard for. But he was far from satisfied.

Star Fleet was certainly covering all the bases on this one. Making sure that every `i' was dotted and `t' crossed. His court appointed lawyer was all of twenty-two years and so earnest Kirk had to smile. Not that Star Fleet didn't want him to have good counsel, but he and the powers both knew that all his lawyer would really have to do was monitor the proceedings to make sure that everything was done correctly.

And Lieutenant Marshall was certainly doing that. Kirk had come to an agreement with him after only two weeks. Kirk would not have him removed from the case as long as Marshall did his work and left Kirk alone. It offended Marshall initially that Kirk would not listen to his strategy for turning Kirk's case around. But a long, often terse, talk from the Star Fleet Judge Advocate, in his office, had made the situation clear even to Marshall.

Kirk finished brushing his hair, tossed the towel on the chair by the door and took a quick look around the room before approaching the door's sensor range. At the sight and sound of

the opening door his guard, Lieutenant Brandon, snapped to attention and then, at Kirk's wave, relaxed again.

"What's on the schedule for today, Lieutenant? More of the same?" Most days involved at least three hours of tedious rhetoric during which he always sat silent unless specifically addressed as the wheels of justice ground exceedingly fine.

"Only one change, Admiral." Kirk still received the little perks of his rank. A private room, respect from his guards, etc. A gilded cage indeed. "The Orion ambassador has requested an audience for fifteen hundred hours."

Kirk had to mull that one. Orion? He started down the hall to the officer's mess for his breakfast and Brandon followed. He thought back carefully over the last ten years for any incidents involving Orions and was unable to think of anything of note.

They had run into the generally large individuals and brutish crews on many shore leaves. Mostly on sleazy planets they were forced to investigate for one reason or another. And aside from the usual bar room brawls, nothing had ever been proved out of the way. They were always found just on the right side of any law. Just barely in most cases.

As he took his tray from the computer, Kirk looked over at Brandon, his eyebrow cocked. Brandon smiled. "We couldn't find anything either, Admiral. It’s your call."

Kirk shrugged and nodded as he unloaded his tray, placing the extra cup of coffee across the table in front of the lieutenant. "Might as well see what he wants. I'll just have to force him into my busy day." Brandon nodded as he made the note on the official itinerary in his datapad. He pressed the transmit button and replaced the device in his pocket, the confirmation having been recorded in the logs accessible to the public.

Kirk ate silently, trying to plan something for his future. But the same problem always intruded itself. Would he have the freedom to be doing ANYTHING after this court martial was over? That he would be officially out of Star Fleet was inevitable. Whether his association with them would be broken immediately or after some lengthy remedial project was a real issue in his planning.

He sighed and pushed back the remainder of the meal, no longer hungry. Brandon finished his coffee and gathered the tray and utensils. Kirk waited until he returned from the recycler and then stood and headed for the gym. It was something he did every morning without fail. It was the only thing that kept his body alive and, with his decreased appetite, in fairly reasonable shape. It also helped his mind by allowing him to work off some very real frustrations.

Two hours later, Kirk emerged from one of the exercise rooms drenched in sweat. It had been a good workout. In the last two months he had been able to lengthen his usual routines and even work in some of the disciplines Spock had taught him many years ago. He was actually in very good shape although he missed the occasional one-on-one combats with some of his old security group. Some of them had been VERY good. Not to mention ten years younger.

Brandon was tagging along in silence as usual. His orders from Star Fleet were clear. Watch and don't participate. Although Kirk hadn't evidenced any desire to leave, they knew he was quite capable of disabling his guard and moving off by himself. To have that guard actually in his grasp was asking a little too much.

Kirk paused at the shower room door to let a young lady enter and noticed a small crowd outside one of the far cubicles. Noting Sulu's presence in the group, he wiped at his face and ambled over.

Hikaru's concentration was complete as he worked with two other men and a diminutive female ensign at the new computer display recently installed in the cubicle wall. The design looked familiar to Kirk, but the interface seemed to be mostly verbal on the external surfaces. Kirk listened carefully as they made final adjustments and closed the computer face and Sulu noticed him for the first time.

"Admiral!" The other with him stiffened to attention. Kirk smiled at them and waved them at ease as Sulu continued. "Good to see you again, sir."

"And you too, Commander. I only caught part of your conversation here."

Sulu smiled at Kirk's interest. Kirk had always been a strong believer in physical exercise for the crew and always tried to keep up with the latest improvements in equipment and technology and get them on his ship for his people.

"You'll like this, Admiral. You know how hard it is to schedule a partner sometimes? Star Fleet's been working on this simulator to provide the external touch." He saw Kirk's interest die as he nodded and started to move away. There had been many such programs and they usually involved bulky equipment and very severe restrictions on movement and use. He laid a hand briefly on Kirk's arm.

Kirk shrugged and followed him and the others through the cubicle door. The first thing he noticed was the size of the space, almost four times that of the normal cubicle. His interest picked up immediately when he noticed that there was no external equipment. The ensign approached.

"Good morning, Admiral. Commander Sulu, I notice that the Admiral is already warmed up. Perhaps he would like to try out our project?" She looked eagerly back and forth between him and Sulu and Kirk just barely caught Sulu's grimace.

Sulu knew Kirk was a "no back up" individual. He also knew that his intense curiosity would lead him to explore this if he could. "Admiral." Sulu started apologetically. "This system is still in development. It has a few bugs that occasionally crop up and cause problems." But Sulu could see it was hopeless. The fire was in Kirk's eyes as he shrugged off the caution.

The ensign could see it too. "Are you acquainted with Jujitsu, Admiral?" Sulu winced as Kirk nodded. "Do you hold a belt?"

"Third degree, black."

She actually smiled and spoke to Sulu. "Excellent. That will test a part of the programming we haven't used yet."

Sulu raised a hand in objection. "All the more reason NOT to let the ADMIRAL test it." He saw immediately it was the wrong thing to say in front of Kirk. Especially with a young and pretty lady present. "You really don't want to do this, Admiral."

"I'm not sure what it is I'm not wanting to do yet, Commander. But we should at least TRY it." Sulu shook his head

but moved back with the others to a wall panel leaving Kirk in the middle of the room.

The ensign spoke into the computer grid. "Computer."

"Working."

"Access program 7 delta 3. Jujitsu, black belt." She glanced at Kirk and smiled. "Free style."

Sulu quickly leaned closer. "Adjustment computer!"

"Waiting."

"Tournament rules."

Kirk realized that Sulu was injecting a measure of protection for him since tournament rules were much more restrictive. He still stood facing them with the towel around his neck and one hand holding each end.

"Ready."

"Activate."

Kirk wondered at their intensified interest and caught a few glances over his shoulder. He looked behind him and turned suddenly and dropped the towel on the deck by the wall. Standing five feet from him was a Japanese Jujitsu master in traditional garb and standing relaxed but ready.

He could recognize it as a holographic projection, since it flickered slightly, and slowly moved forward to examine it more closely. Almost immediately the projection stood straight, and Kirk stopped. It bowed to Kirk and held its position until Kirk bowed back. Then Kirk quickly followed suit when it casually moved into the ready position.

He wasn't sure exactly what the simulation was supposed to do for him, but he reached out tentatively to it. Three seconds later he was struggling to turn in mid-air and slapping the mat as he fell heavily. His face was a curious mixture of incredulity and joy. It only took him seconds to realize that this was something new indeed. He looked from the apparition to Sulu.

"It’s REAL!!" He realized the absurdity of his statement since he had just been tossed cross the room like so much baggage. "I mean, it has substance!"

Sulu nodded, excited in spite of his concerns. "A new concept. Ensign Miland provided the scientific theory. The basis is a hologram. But the theory is to use the pattern generated by

the hologram as the framework for an ionized sensor field. The programming is intense and some of the concepts new, like meshing integrated ions and tachyon residuals. Mr. Scott finished up about a month ago. We've been working up to a full test since then."

That explained to Kirk what Sulu and Scotty had been doing with their time. It also explained the young ensign's delight at his willingness to try it. It also occurred to him that he was really the first to actually do it. He liked being first. He eyed the calmly waiting projection warily. "Programming?"

One of the two other men stepped forward. "Programmed from Master Fu Wong's last three tournaments and exercise classes, Admiral."

Fu Wong! Kirk looked more closely and picked out the facial detail. He had read the works of this highly proficient master when he learned the basics and the projection did resemble him.

Kirk smiled and slowly moved forward. When he stopped the simulation bowed with him and he eased forward. His racing mind had caught up with his body. He knew what he must try. Fu Wong had been dead for fifty years. He couldn't know about the Sandistini maneuver.

Kirk grabbed the material of the master's judogi, or Gi, forcefully and was grabbed solidly in return. He moved slightly to the left in the classic round-about and suddenly switched directions and turned under the projection's rising arm. Gone was the technological wonder. This was a very REAL opponent. He shifted his grip and quickly straightened and threw the very solid projection across his hip.

The master rolled with the movement, as it should, rather than fighting it and slapped the mat as it landed and rolled to its feet. It slapped its hands together sharply and shouted. "HAI!" Its features were twisted in obvious approval.

"Computer. End simulation!"

Kirk frowned as he turned to Sulu at the computer grid. Sulu offered no explanation and Kirk joined the small group by the door.

"The main problem remaining in the program, Admiral, is the instant escalation in the projection's ability to maximum when the opponent does manage to succeed. The rules become a little blurred and it can quickly become lethal."

Kirk nodded and sighed and addressed the entire group. "I thank you all for the opportunity to try something unique. I would like to offer my services to test the program whenever you feel it is safe." He was a little surprised but returned their bows with one of his own. He gratefully took the proffered towel from Brandon as he turned and headed for the showers. The spring in his step was evident. Brandon lengthened his stride to keep up and smiled.

Chapter Three
"DISHONORED"

The gavel pounded against the hardwood inset of the judge's table and six Star Fleet careers ended in disgrace and dishonor. The six still stood at the defense table, alone and lost.

Kirk turned to his left to look at his comrades of many years. He searched their faces carefully but found only stunned recognition for their new status. CIVILIANS!

Scotty blinked back the tears of frustration and looked briefly at Kirk. He shook his head and slowly turned and moved towards the court room door. At the sound of the media reporters waiting outside, he squared his shoulders, brushed angrily at his eyes and strode majestically through the portal.

`` The sounds of eager voices shouting questions rose and fell as the door opened to let him out and quickly closed behind him. The others looked at the closed door and felt the sickening turn of their stomachs at the thought of the publicity awaiting them.

Uhura cried and dabbed the tears from her eyes as Sulu and Chekov led her to a back door. Kirk watched them leave in silence. They had not said good-bye or even looked back. He stared after them for a moment and then started when McCoy grabbed his arm.

Kirk turned and looked him in the eye. He had hoped for some hope, some sign of the fire that characterized his friend. But all he saw was weariness. The Doctor's tired eyes looked his face over carefully and then McCoy nodded. Kirk started to speak but McCoy shook his head briefly.

"You did what you had to do, Jim. The only thing you could do. I'm just sorry it turned out this way." McCoy shook his head again and started to turn away and stopped. "I've got to go ...." But he stopped again and sighed. Now he really had NO place to go. He patted Kirk's arm and turned and walked away.

Kirk just stood a moment with his head hanging down, his hands resting on the table, his mind in a whirl. He had expected

the judges to throw the book at him. But not his crew! They were following HIS orders. His mind echoed the fateful words . . .

"The judgment of this court has been modified by the arguments of Mr. Kirk. Instead of incarceration for the destruction of Fleet property, to wit the USS ENTERPRISE, or continued extremely isolated service at maximum reduction in rank, the court is awarding a discharge to all the plaintiffs before it. Your association with Star Fleet is terminated as of this reading. You will be paid to date and provided with suitable civilian attire. Your names will be stricken from Star Fleet records from this day hence."

All his arguments and logic had saved them from a worse fate but saved them only to be cut loose from the only life any of them had known for so many years. He knew they would survive. All of them had savings from the five-year mission. There just had been very little to spend the money on. Star Fleet had provided food, clothes . . . everything!

He stood straight and turned as the chief judge left the bench and came around the table and stopped in front of him, looking him in the eye.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I really had little choice. The council used every bit of influence it wields in Star Fleet to ensure you and you crew got the maximum penalty the law allows. I'm sure Fleet will be hearing about our actual judgment for months."

Kirk looked deep in the eyes of his old commander. "I understand as well as I can, Tom. But my CREW!"

"The only thing that allowed me to act in their behalf is that fifty Fleet captains from Starships to tugs were clamoring for them at ANY rank. That and your plea on their behalf."

Kirk looked at him a moment more and then nodded in resignation. "Thank you, Tom. I appreciate what you did do for us."

"Good luck, Jim." Kirk took the extended hand and shook it and then released it and watched as his friend left the courtroom. He stared after him until he realized that his counsel was still shuffling papers around in his briefcase, waiting to talk to him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant, for all your efforts for us."

He was young. And still new enough not to be inured to the harshness of Fleet judgments. He looked up now, his face still stretched in shock, the enormity of his role in this drama still just sinking in. "But I failed you, Admiral. I mean, sir. I wasn't able to help you at all!"

Kirk dredged up a smile. "Nonsense. In fact, your advice was essential in helping me decide on the best route to take for the defense of my crew. Every one of those fifty Fleet captains had been told in no uncertain terms to avoid me, and my people, like the plague. Thanks to you, I did convince them to put in a word with the judge. You heard him yourself. That was instrumental in convincing him to buck the pressure from the Council and show some leniency."

"You really think I made a difference here, sir?"

Kirk slapped him on the shoulder. "I know you did, lieutenant. You can't win every case, but you can learn from all of them. Just continue to do the best you can. You'll always come out on top. Even if you lose the case."

The young man nodded to himself for a moment and then focused back on Jim Kirk, the look of respect in his gaze. "Thank you, sir." He quickly grabbed his case and headed for the door. Kirk watched him go and marveled, as he always did, at the resiliency of youth.

He dropped the pencil he had been using at the table and walked out the door himself.

Chapter Four
"The Cage"

James T. Kirk closed the center drawer of his desk softly, shutting from view the scribes and rules and other tools of his latest trade.

He sat back in the super-plush executive chair his secretary had ordered for him two weeks ago when he took over this office. The chair was very comfortable. His eyes flickered shut and he relaxed almost asleep. Suddenly his eyes snapped open and he leaped to his feet, shoving the chair back and against the wall as he rose.

"Having a nice little nap!!", he growled to himself as his eyes traveled the "Executive" desk for the thousandth time searching for some clue of what he was supposed to be doing. He knew what his new boss had told him.

"Just relax, Jim. Take a few days to unwind and settle in and then we'll have you working full eight-hour days and wishing for a few minutes of peace and quiet."

That had been a week ago. If he got any more "unwound", they would have to wake him to send him home at the end of the work day. He stalked the confines of his cell, musing that it was indeed a prison to him, however gilded and fine the furnishings.

His pacing took him to the window and he looked out at the panorama of the city so far below. Soon his eyes moved upward of their own accord and sought the sky. His mind pulled visions of what lay beyond the calm blue expanse and fluffy white clouds from his memory.

Space. Deep, dark space with its immense distances and pin points of light that guided him to new discoveries. It took him a moment to abandon his reverie when he realized that his secretary had come in the door. He turned from the window with a scowl and glared at her intrusion into his private moment of peace.

She hesitated and almost backed from the room apologetically, but then glanced behind her and moved in the room further and closed the door carefully. She stayed with her

back to the door not knowing how to proceed. Kirk sighed and smiled tentatively.

"Sorry, Mary. Just a bad moment. You have something for me?"

Mary took her hands from the door behind her to join them before her and begin wringing them. Surely he hadn't frightened her that badly. He smiled warmly and seated himself at the desk again, motioning her forward.

She self-consciously dropped her hands and surreptitiously wiped them against her dress as she moved to the edge of the desk and automatically returned his smile. But she remembered something in the outer office and glanced that way and then back to him and leaned forward across the desk and spoke in a whisper.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, sir. But I thought I'd better come in and speak to you." She half glanced at the door again. "I've never dealt with aliens before and I'm not sure of the protocol or . . ."

Kirk bolted upright, scaring her again. "Aliens?"

Mary swallowed twice and nodded. "Well. Just one actually, sir. But he's so BIG!"

Kirk nodded, smiled for her benefit and sat back down. "I assume he wanted to speak to me?"

Mary nodded quickly. "Should I call security, sir?"

Kirk grinned reassuringly at her and shook his head. "Just show him in please, Mary."

She looked shocked for moment but then nodded and went back to the door. She took a deep breath and opened the door holding it between herself and the outer office. "Mr. Kirk will see you now, sir," her voiced quavered.

She retreated even further as the huge body of the Orion ambassador eased through the door and quickly made her escape when he had moved to the desk. Kirk studied the figure before him as the door closed quickly and firmly.

The ambassador was typical of his species, standing over six and a half feet tall, massively built and very ugly by human standards. He knew quite a few Star Fleet people who had backed away from encounters of this sort. Kirk smiled and

gestured at the chair by his desk. He didn't offer to shake hands, a human custom insulting to an Orion.

The ambassador sat in the chair and reached into his tunic and withdrew a slim device, pressed a button on it and placed it on the desk. Kirk glanced down at it, noting the uninterrupted sweep of lights across its face and then looking back up.

"There are no recording devices here, ambassador."

"I know *now* that there are none that *work*, Kirk." He sat back in the chair causing it to groan under the unaccustomed weight. "What I have to say is between us only."

Kirk looked puzzled for a moment and then frowned. "If you're here to repeat the offer you made during the trial, forget it. I still don't want to work for you people."

The ambassador smiled. "It's been two months now, Kirk. Time enough to move through two other jobs to this one. Also, time enough for the rejects to return from your applications to every space job you applied for."

Kirk started and straightened but then sat back and smiled woodenly. "Actually, I have submitted two more just yesterday. I should be getting a positive response from one of them."

The Orion shook his massive head. "Kirk, Kirk, Kirk. Why do you do this to yourself! It was three applications and you already must realize that Star Fleet has already contacted them to shut you out."

Kirk stood and moved to the window, leaving his back to the Orion, the stiffness of his stance visible across the room. "You also must know that we mean you to betray no confidences, Kirk. We offer you the *ONLY* chance you will *EVER* have to get back into space, Kirk." He paused for a moment to let it sink in.

"Yes. Back in space. A command of your own. We can use your talents, Kirk." Kirk turned from the window. "And not in Federation space. New space. Unexplored."

Kirk turned back to the window, his hands gripping the curtains as he gazed up into the heavens. Long moments passed as neither spoke. Finally, Kirk bowed his head. "Never in Federation space?"

The Orion smiled. "Never in your ship. You could return from time to time. We would not keep you from your world forever."

Silence for many minutes. "And my job for you? What would I do?"

"Exploration. First contacts with new races we would hope to do business with. You have much experience in these areas."

Kirk spun and glared at him. "And also experience in battle. Isn't that what you really want? Someone to fight for you?"

The Orion shrugged. "Space is vast, Kirk, and peopled by some troublesome races. You are correct that part of your appeal to us is your knowledge of how to defeat those peoples we have come to know as common enemies. We have as little use for the Romulans and Klingons as you do, Kirk. And we do desire to have some success at protecting our own interests."

Kirk moved from the window and began pacing the floor. "You make it sound so real. 'Exploration'. 'Protecting your interests'." He stopped and faced the Orion. "But I know that you are unprincipled scoundrels. Masters of the shady deal. Outright thieves when you can be!"

The Orion was silent a moment. "We may not meet your HIGH ethical standards, Kirk. Possess slightly different values than you do. But two things should be made clear to you here. Your ship would operate under your command alone. You would accomplish our missions. But in your own way. We are interested in results, Kirk. If you accomplish them in a slightly different manner, that is acceptable for us."

Kirk stared at him for a moment, the turmoil within him plain. Finally he grated between clenched teeth, "And the second thing?"

The Orion smiled widely. "You would be in space again, Kirk."

Kirk closed his eyes and shuddered. Then he opened them and moved to the desk and sat. He glanced once around the large office with its impressive trappings. His loathing was evident. He grabbed a stylus and pad and began drawing unrelated lines and breathing deeply.

"And the ship? Some derelict patched together and powered by chemicals?"

"A Constitution class vessel."

Kirk looked up sharply. "How . . .??"

"The Romulans had captured her practically intact. But they lost interest after incapacitating the Federation crew when we destroyed both of their vessels."

"And the crew?"

"Removed and placed on one of our trade worlds. They are quite safe."

"The Columbus! She was believed destroyed by the Romulans."

"Still in space dock now. Completing her refit."

"Refit?"

"An Orion ship must have certain amenities. We have delayed completion so you can make the finishing touches YOUR way."

He dropped the stylus and stood. "I am required by Federation law to inform Star Fleet .."

"You are no longer a Federation citizen, Kirk. As of this moment you are an Orion employee with diplomatic credentials. You will come with me and be aboard our vessel in one hour. You no longer have to report to anyone, Kirk. Anyone but ME!"

Kirk nodded. "Star Fleet has removed me from active consideration. I had my own ways of finding out that they have been behind my rejection on every space job I applied for. I want to get back into space. But I'm serious about Federation space. I won't be responsible for the loss of Federation lives. Even if I never get back to space."

The Orion smiled fully revealing less than aesthetically pleasing teeth in a savage grin. "This fits your profile, Kirk. It is something that has puzzled us. How you can be so effective and yet be so soft."

"No Federation space or contacts!"

"Done, Kirk. Had you demanded less, we would have had little use for you." He stood and smiled down at Kirk. "Shall we leave?"

Kirk closed his eyes for a moment and shuddered, then opened them and glanced around the fancy cage one last time and nodded decisively. "It can't be soon enough for me!"

The Orion snapped up the still blinking device from the desk and followed Kirk out the door.

Chapter Five
"Read and Heed"

Uhura wrinkled her nose in distaste at the acrid stench of burnt insulation and wiring. She carefully monitored the firefighting efforts of the two young men who had just burnt up a month's worth of work. When the fire was out and the exhaust fan had pulled the majority of the pale blue smoke from the room and the two contrite young men were standing looking at the damage and anything else BUT her, she slowly clapped her hands. When they turned to look at her, she smiled.

"I had originally hoped that you two were intelligent enough to learn from other people's mistakes. When I pointed out to you that the Maltor model seven was only rated at twelve amps and WE drew a nice red line on the gauge and the control that it would mean something to you."

She shrugged her shoulders and gestured at the comm panel. "What you see before you is one month's worth of trial and error and experimentation burnt to a crisp. It is now 2200 hours. In the two hours before midnight you will have the bad components of this comm panel pulled, a list made and the carcasses carried to salvage."

She pulled a flat piece of plastic from her pocket and threw it on the table. "At that time, you will take this magic wand and draw the replacement parts from stores and begin putting OUR comm panel back together again. I, in the meanwhile, will be enjoying a good night's sleep with a clear conscience and sweet dreams of coming back here tomorrow at 0700 and finding OUR comm panel back in one piece and FULLY functional."

"Are there any questions, gentlemen?" Not surprisingly, there were none. Uhura turned and exited the lab through the office door and found Bob Boland waiting for her. They both turned to the screen in Bob's desk and watched quietly as her two assistants in the other room surveyed the damage. Neither said a word but picked up their tools and began dismantling the equipment. Uhura looked over at Bob and held out her hand.

"I really didn't think they'd have the guts to stick it out," he said as he drew a handful of credits from his pocket, selected fifty and gave them to Uhura. Uhura smiled and tossed the coins up and snapped her hand around them.

Then she looked at the screen again and slammed the coins on Bob's desk. "You keep 'em, Bob. Too much like taking candy from a baby," the words reflecting humor but her voice shading into her disappointment and resignation.

Bob shut off the monitor, swung his chair out and sat heavily. "I'm not sure what to say or do now. I'm supposed to be the manager of this circus. The guy with all the answers. But all I can see with you is that you have singlehandedly built the best two-man team we have, have them learning far ahead of any of the other teams and are completely dissatisfied." He toyed with the coins and flipped them across the desk. "I don't think its money . . ."

"It's not the money, Bob. I'm making three times what I made in Starfleet."

He sighed and smiled a little. "I know. Had to go to Laura Petrie myself to justify it. We wanted you really badly."

"And I'm letting you down?"

Bob came quickly to his feet to confront her. "You know that's not so. We're weeks ahead of schedule. Plowing into new areas and handling them well. You have positive control over your assignments and even more over your crews."

"Then what . . . ?"

"It's you, Nyota. When you first started it was all new and you came alive putting this together. Now I can see you forcing yourself to perform. And you do perform well," he hastily added. At her puzzled look he continued. "But I can see that you aren't satisfied!"

Uhura smiled tiredly at him and sank into her chair. "I didn't realize it was so evident."

"Only to old space jockeys like me, who've lost a few really outstanding people like you to dissatisfaction. I've learned over the years to bring out these things instead of hiding them and to try and make some resolution. How'm I doin'?"

"You read me like a book."

"I'm just having a little problem understanding the message I'm reading."

She turned and smiled at him sadly. "Understandable. I'm not really sure why myself."

"I know what it is." At her quizzical and slightly apprehensive look, he continued. "You want me to say it but you're afraid at the same time that I might be right and that you'll have to act on it and move on to another job."

The denial died on her lips, unspoken. "You miss space. Space and the challenges it brought you. Space and being not just on the cutting edge of technology but making that edge yourself."

He paused at the look of ineffable sadness that passed over her face. He held his tongue as she struggled to compose herself and finally just dropped her head a little staring at the corner of her desk. "So I guess I'll have to make the supreme sacrifice and release you from this job."

Uhura looked up at him, the shocked look opening her eyes and her mouth. But the hint of a smile around his mouth made her pause and her brow furrow. "Come on, Bob. Drop the other shoe."

"IF you want it, I have a position open that could utilize your unique qualities." He could see her hopeful stare and continued with a smile. "I leave next week and assume my new duties as head of space research aboard the INTEGRAL. Laura wanted you to take my place here as head of training."

Her face reflected at once her joy at his promotion and her reluctance to be left behind. "Bob, that's great! The INTEGRAL is the cutting edge of technology. More advances have come out of her work in the last few years . . ." Her head cocked and her eyebrow raised as she eyed his wide-open smile. "You said she 'wanted' me to head this unit up."

Bob laughed outright. "I wondered how long that agile mind would take to pick up on that." He paused for a beat then continued. "I told her she could either transfer you with me as my special assistant, with a 25% increase in pay, or she could get herself another boy." He could see her shocked and hopeful look

and noted that she was holding her breath. He smiled again. "She accepted my offer."

It took a moment but the implications of deep space, research and working with an excellent crew turned her look of incredulity into a vision of joy. "IF I want it? It's a dream come true!" For the next few moments he had his hands full hugging her and having his back pounded. Finally, he eased her back and patted her shoulder.

"Easy girl. We still have a week to go. And in that week, I'll expect you to have Ann Johnson up to speed on your new training syllabus so she can take my place."

"But Bob, I have five new projects starting next week. And there are . . ."

"There is nothing that Ann and her new assistant, John, can't handle now that you've set up the schedule and the goals and laid out all the progress steps." He halted her continued protests with an upraised hand. "If you have any further thoughts, put them in the computer and explain them to Ann. You do feel that she can handle this don't you?"

Uhura nodded. He took a flat plastic oblong from his pocket and put it in her hand. She looked at the authorization badge with its embedded chip that gave her complete access to the facilities aboard the INTEGRAL and then weighed it carefully in her hand as she looked him in the eye. "I think I'd better be very careful with you, my friend. This badge takes a week to make. You read me entirely too well."

"Like a book," he smiled and agreed readily.

The big man lay in the dirt behind the huge warehouse, wiped sweat from his eyes in a futile effort to clear his still blurred vision and looked upside down at the slender young man that stood back from him. His chest heaved from his recent exertions and he noted with some chagrin that his opponent wasn't even breathing hard. He took a deep breath, swung up to his hands and knees and then to one foot as he observed his nemesis standing easily just out of reach and balanced carefully on the balls of his feet.

His ribs protested, and he groaned as he rose unsteadily to his feet and wiped his hands on his sweat soaked shirt. He straightened his back in preparation to attack when a young girl rounded the corner of the building on the run. She took in the scene at a glance and came and stood in front of the big man with her feet planted and her arms on her hips.

"Cletus Wilson! What in the world are you doing back here?"

Cletus backed down as he never would from a man. "Now, Mary Anne, you just go on back to the shop and let me take care of this business."

Mary Anne took advantage of his step back to move forward to face him more squarely. "Becky business?"

"Nobody manhandles my girl and gets away with it!"

"Blinded again by that love, Cletus. You seen Marty around yesterday or today?"

"Marty? Why, no."

"He was discharged from the hospital today. Has his ribs taped up and his jaw wired shut. He should be back in a week."

"What happened to Marty?"

"He came in drunk Monday while you were over at the city and started pawing Becky. Becky objected and this gentleman," she pointed at the smaller man, "asked Marty to leave her alone. Marty's cut from the same bolt you are so he had to be shown the error of his ways."

"Marty! But Sam Johnson said . . ."

"Wake up, Cletus! Marty is getting out of the hospital after trying his best with this guy. Then Sam tells you that he did it instead of Marty so you'll get beat up too. With you and Marty out of the way, who'll have a clear shot with Becky?"

Cletus's jaw swung open for a second and then hardened with resolve. Mary Anne looked pointedly at her watch. "I imagine it will take you twenty minutes to get cleaned up. That's twenty minutes out of your pay! I'll expect you back in the lab and ready to go back to work by two o'clock. Don't make me mad, Cletus. Please?"

She turned and walked quickly away leaving the combatants quietly standing in the afternoon sunlight. Cletus

shook his head, wiped off his face with his shirt and walked over to the smaller man. "I guess I made a fool of myself."

"Not at all. You were fighting for what you believed in. No one can fault that. I just wish you had believed me when I was protesting my innocence."

Cletus hung his head and nodded and then looked up, smiled and hesitantly extended his hand. "Cletus Wilson."

The smaller man hesitated but took his hand firmly. "Hikaru Sulu."

"Sorry about the mistaken identity. And thanks for the lesson."

"No problem. I guess we'd better get cleaned up and back into the shop. She sounded really mad."

"Mary Anne? She always sounds like that when she talks to me. Has for almost twenty years. Ever since she was big enough to baby-sit me. She's my sister. But we had better get back. Say, how about joining us after work at the Palomino Club for a few drinks. I'm buying."

Sulu thought a moment and then nodded. "Sounds good. I'll see you there."

Chapter Six
"Maintaining Priorities"

Montgomery Scott patted his face dry and looked for an extra moment in the mirror at the white hair that seemed to be taking over his head. He sighed deeply and dropped the towel into the laundry bin. He made a brief effort to stand straighter and conceal some of the penalty weight he'd accumulated but waved his hand at the ridiculous image and turned off the lights.

With the lighting off, the only relief from the black of the night was the faint glow of dawn from his window. He glanced briefly around his room, picked up his latest manual and grimaced. He'd been on this job for two months now, ever since finishing up with Sulu and his hologram project. He hefted the manual again and grimaced at the remembered content.

"You have to understand the constraints built into our Federation contracts, Mr. Scott, before you can hope to make any significant contributions."

Thus had spake his boss, a twenty-year veteran of this organization, and a stickler for the rules. Scott was strongly tempted to tell the officious idiot to take his manuals and stuff them .... But he just smiled and sighed again. And he thought he had restrictive regulations in Star Fleet!

Scott sat in the office of the president of the company and marveled at the time and effort he had expended to get this far. He was scheduled to fill a five-minute slot that was available because one of the president's appointments had canceled. At first he had bristled, but on reflection realized it would take him much less than five minutes to quit. The only reason he had bothered at all was to repay the courtesy the man had shown him when he met with Scott personally to offer him the job.

A low-pitched buzz caught his attention and he looked up at the secretary and caught her wide smile as she waved him to the door. He smiled back automatically, went into the large, richly appointed office and closed the door behind him.

He looked first to the huge, real wood desk positioned between the corner windows and then slowly turned and found

the president rising from one of a pair of comfortable looking chairs by a low table in a corner of the room. Scott joined him and accepted the outstretched hand. He sank into the indicated chair and frowned slightly when the man held up a hand to forestall his prepared speech.

"Let me guess. You're here to quit."

Scott's brow furrowed but he nodded and dropped the heavy manual he had brought from his room on the table.

He glanced at it and turned back to Scott. "I'm sorry for the inconvenience of that manual. But it has served its purpose. And no, Mr. Scott. The purpose of the manual was not to make you quit. It was to let me see how long you would let yourself be stymied by Edgar's approach to keeping this company going."

Scott frowned and shook his head. "I'm not sure I understand."

"When I asked you to join us, I already knew that you were a top-flight engineer. I also knew that you had spent the last fifteen years in Star Fleet. I purposely threw you to Edgar because I had to know if you were a nitpicker as well. The fact that you are here to quit answers that question."

"Then you don't actually follow all these . . . ." and Scott tapped the cover of the manual.

"Don't misunderstand, Mr. Scott. As a company, we try very hard to stay within the guidelines specified by the Federation. They are, after all, out major client. But to make sure of our compliance to those restrictions, I have Edgar. I need you for something else entirely."

"I'm confused."

"Understandable. I hired you for your expertise. I didn't hire you to be an administrator. I have plenty of those. I want you as the head of my research department."

Scott's face momentarily reflected his surprise. "That sounds like an administrator's job."

He smiled. "It does sound that way, doesn't it? But let me explain your duties. First, you will have to acquaint yourself with our current projects."

"I already have, sir."

It was the president's turn to look surprised. "But I thought . . . ." he said as he tapped the manual.

"You thought that thing took my whole attention these two weeks. Bah! I'd be brain dead!"

The president smiled again. "Good. Good! And I expect you have a few ideas already?"

Scott smiled back. "Well. A few things did occur to me."

"Excellent. As head of research you report directly to me. I'll expect a weekly report on your plans, existing projects and future projects. I'm giving you one outstanding secretary to handle putting the reports together. Just feed her the information. She will gen the report and pass it along to me. And a copy to Edgar."

He caught Scott's questioning look.

"If Edgar has a question, he'll ask me. You just get the job done."

He stood, indicating that the meeting was over and Scott automatically rose from his chair from years of Star Fleet training.

"Will you take the job?"

Scott smiled broadly, took the outstretched hand and shook it. "Aye, sir."

"Good. Your new secretary is waiting outside to show you to your offices. Good luck!"

Scott gave a final squeeze and headed for the door and the real job he had been hoping for. The president just watched him hurrying out the door and smiled at the transformation from the frowning entrant to the smiling new head of his research department.

Halfway around the world, Pavel Chekov pushed back from his lunch and wiped his mouth. "Excellent borscht, Katrina. Where are we on the Planitin project?"

"Pavel, Pavel, Pavel." Chekov frowned at the imminent barrage. "You have only been here three months, you have revamped the entire security system for the facility and you are

two weeks ahead of schedule on the Planitin project. Relax a little!"

"But Katrina . . . ."

Katrina pushed the plates into the recycler and moved around the table to Chekov's side. Chekov looked alarmed. His brows rose to his hairline when she pulled him back from the table and sat on his lap.

"Katrina!"

For a moment there were only muffled protests as she thoroughly kissed him. She clung tenaciously to the back of the chair to block his efforts to push her off his lap. Finally, he gave up and sat back resignedly. She broke the kiss and sat back a little. His manner grew very frosty.

"If you are quite finished!"

She smiled at him. "Actually, I had hoped we had only just begun."

He glanced pointedly at the door and back to her. She laughed.

"Number one, you are the head of security and if someone did walk in, it's none of their business. And besides," she kissed him briefly. "I locked the door."

His eyes turned up in supplication.

"So now you will have to stop and pay a little attention to me, Pavel."

He made a superhuman effort and dislodged her from his lap and quickly stood so she could not hop back on.

"There is a time and place for everything, Katrina!"

She sniffled once and his brows drew together. "And where is this time and place, Pavel?"

"We can have dinner tonight and go back to our apartment and . . . ."

She stood facing him, arms akimbo. "And how many times have we had a dinner besides unsatisfying snacks before we went to bed?"

"Well. A few times anyway."

"Once, Pavel. Two weeks after you got here. And how many chances have we had to warm our bed properly."

"Katrina, I . . . ."

“Once, Pavel. That same night. Every other night since then, when you do manage to drag yourself away from here, you arrive home completely exhausted and fall into bed and ignore me completely.”

“I realize . . . .”

“I’m tired of being ignored, Pavel!”

“Perhaps tonight . . . .”

Her hands flew straight up in the air as she screamed, “NO, Pavel! I don’t want promises!”

Chekov considered. The Planitin project was ahead of schedule. As a matter of fact, he personally was at a standstill until more data came in from the site. The other two projects were not scheduled for an active phase for three weeks. He nodded once and moved up behind her as she stood there hugging herself. She squealed as he scooped her up and headed for the door.

She recovered and managed to unlock the door and he pushed through with her still in his arms. His secretary’s smiling face stopped him. “Your car has been warmed up and moved to the front door, sir. I’ve rescheduled your afternoon appointment for tomorrow. And your reservations at Boratin’s is for one half hour from now.”

She stopped and Chekov recovered from his shock and hoisted Katrina higher and glared at her. “Must the staff be included in your machinations?!”

“Only if I wanted to succeed.”

He paused for a moment but then laughed and carried her out of the office, throwing back over his shoulder, “Hold my calls, Irena.”

“Yes, sir,” she laughed and went back to work.

Chapter Seven
"Making It Better"

Leonard McCoy straightened from the microscope and rubbed his back. How had he ever stayed bent over so long when he was younger? He plucked the slide from its holder and annotated the instructions for its testing and shoved it back in the rack.

He surveyed the neat row and wrote out detailed parameters for the group. He finished just as his assistant, Sam, walked in from the storeroom. He handed them to him and commented, "A couple of these look promising. Tomorrow we can check them out and filter out the useless ones."

Sam carefully read the instructions and raised an eyebrow at McCoy.

"Tomorrow? It will take a week just to get the authorization to have the test run over at the University's lab. If we're lucky, we MAY get them back by the first of the month."

"University lab? Why in the name of a Similiean dirt worm would I want to send this over to the University? We can run these simple tests in our own lab!"

"I don't think we can . . . ."

"I'm sure I saw a basic regenerative slide analyzer in the lab just the other day."

"You did? I only read about one in school and I've never seen one in our lab."

McCoy's face grew redder and Sam slowly backed for the door and then he stopped as McCoy's face came back to normal and he smiled sweetly at Sam.

"Why don't we just go down to the lab and have a little look around, hey?"

The question, Sam knew, was rhetorical. He tagged along with the slides as McCoy brushed past him and headed down the hall. McCoy threw open the door of the large laboratory and stepped inside. Two people bent over a microscope at the other end of the lab and the majority of the lights were off.

He flipped on the lights and glared about him. Most of the equipment was covered with dusty drop cloths. His color rose two notches and he breathed deeply and turned to Sam.

"I thought this was our lab."

"It is, sir."

"Everything in it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then why aren't we using this stuff?"

Sam shuffled uneasily and finally looked McCoy in the eye. "I've been here three years, Doctor, and I've never seen ninety per cent of it used."

McCoy took a few very obvious deep breaths. "And why is that?"

Sam ducked his head and murmured, "No one knows how to use it."

"NO ONE KNOWS HOW . . . .?!?"

McCoy paused, breathed deeply and took his pulse. Sam observed this worriedly.

"Are you alright, sir?"

"Alright? Alright? Of course I'm alright!" He breathed deeply again and then smiled at Sam. "I think we have a total of thirty people on our staff, don't we?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where are they?"

"Muson and Laran are there checking the slides you gave us last week. Since we didn't have any other equipment for checking them, the others are researching in the library."

"In the library. Hum. The library! I think we can teach them more than they can pick up reading a few dusty old books."

He glanced at the wall clock which was broken and then at his wrist.

"It is now ten hundred hours. By thirteen hundred hours I want every last member of our team in this lab. You will lead the group and when I come in here at fifteen hundred, every cover will be removed from every piece of equipment in this lab. Every bad overhead light will be replaced. Everything in this lab will be dusted, washed, cleaned . . . . whatever it takes."

"Yes, sir!"

“And please inform our colleagues that we will be learning something which will be very beneficial to their continued employment on this project.”

Sam nodded, wiped his brow and headed out the door, pausing only long enough to carefully place the rack of slides on an uncovered tabletop.

“How to do the job they were hired for,” McCoy shouted at Sam’s rapidly retreating back. He caught a glimpse of Musan and Laran sidling toward the door.

“Just in time, gentlemen. Both of you run down to building maintenance and draw enough cleaning supplies for twenty people.”

“Yes, sir!,” they chorused.

“And enough lights to re-lamp this entire room!”

They only nodded as they scurried past. McCoy grunted once and picked up the rack of slides and headed back to his office.

The light tapping on his doorframe finally penetrated McCoy’s concentration and he looked up to see Sam in the door. Sam’s smock was dirty and his hair was awry.

“Yes?”

“It’s fifteen-thirty, sir.”

McCoy made a great show of looking at his watch.

“Why so it is. Let’s not keep our colleagues waiting.”

Sam followed at McCoy’s heels enumerating what they had accomplished. McCoy nodded as he walked. He strode into the lab and stopped in amazement. Every cover was gone. Every light had been replaced. The tabletops were spotless. The external portions of the equipment were spotless. And his crew was standing along one wall looking apprehensively at him

None of them was over twenty-two. Eighteen men and twelve women. Scared to death at possibly losing their first job out of the university. McCoy drew Sam back out into the corridor and shut the door softly.

“Nice work, Sam. I think you will find that most of the equipment in that room is very similar to what you trained on in school. Make assignments based on any specialized work they may have done and have them breakdown each piece and

thoroughly clean it." McCoy took a scrap of paper from his pocket and scribbled his comm code on it.

"Only use this if you have to."

He looked squarely in Sam's eyes as that worthy stuffed the paper in his lab coat pocket.

"I have every confidence in you and your ability to get this job done. You may have to push a little, but I want everyone out of here by 2200. Understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"We will meet here at 0900 and try these things out to see just how much of our own testing we can do. They can use the experience and we can stand to have the work done quickly."

"Yes, sir. We'll be here, sir."

McCoy hesitated, about to tell this boy that he didn't require so many "sirs" but held his tongue and moved away. He heard the lab door open and close as he walked down the hall.

It was 0900 and McCoy hesitated in the hallway outside the lab. He finally straightened his smock, ran fingers through his hair and laughed at himself. He opened the door and stepped inside.

The young men and women were aligned along the far wall, smocks ironed to creases. The lights glared off the polished equipment. The flat finished floor was spotless. Everything seemed to say, "Look at me!"

He stopped and looked over at the assembled group, standing almost at attention with bated breath, and smiled.

"People, I'm proud of you. If we can make this place perform as good as it looks, we'll have the best lab in the city!"

There were a few hesitant smiles and Sam quickly took charge.

"Everyone to their equipment. Doctor McCoy and I will be touring the lab and you can show your particular piece and ask any questions you need."

The crew scurried to their positions and Sam took his place at McCoy's side. He suppressed a smile and moved to the first table.

It was 1800. And he was tired but still elated. McCoy rubbed his face and closed the notepad on his desk. He had ordered in lunch and they had covered every piece of equipment in the lab. The kids knew more than they thought they did. It was a shame that some of the test equipment was so old. At times he was hard put to come up with the answers. But now everything was in perfect operational status.

He unbuttoned his smock, lay it on the counter and picked up his notes. He stopped at the door as he heard footsteps approaching. Sam knocked and came in.

“Myjenski and Slarra are setting up the Sorensen distillatory. It has to run for twelve hours before we can use the output, so they wanted to get it set up tonight since many of the experiments require the refined Mytallin. Singh and Rafferty have taken samples from the first set of slides and placed them in the incubator in the media you requested. We should have some results on those cultures by midday tomorrow.”

He hesitated and McCoy looked at him expectantly.

“Nothing, Doctor.” McCoy caught his arm as he turned to leave and looked him straight in the eye.

“I’ve never been one to be lavish with my praise, Sam. But you have done a remarkable job in getting this place and these people turned around. I couldn’t have asked for a better assistant.”

“I . . . . uh, that is, thank you, Doctor.”

“And as my “right hand man” we have to get one thing straight immediately.”

Sam looked mildly concerned, searching his mind for something he forgot.

“We must communicate. And I don’t mean “Yes, Doctor” and “No, Doctor” I don’t have all the answers. Together we might come close. Lord knows these kids had enough questions today. But you and I must see the overall picture. I haven’t hesitated to let you know what’s on MY mind. I need input back from you.

“Correct me, offer suggestions or volunteer information. But keep me informed. You’ve done a really good job so far. But covering my behind may be your biggest assignment. We have the potential for being the best research staff in the city. And we

have three major projects that no one else wanted because they didn't think they could be done.

"I KNOW they can be done. And I expect us to get them done right here in this building. Not farming our work out to some rinky-dink outfit. From what I saw today, we've got the talent to turn out some excellent work. Help me get it done."

He squeezed Sam's arm and then turned to the table to pick up his notes and didn't find them.

"Now what in tarnation did I . . . .?"

McCoy turned to look at Sam when he cleared his throat. Sam looked pointedly down at McCoy's pocket. McCoy followed his gaze and pulled his notes from his pocket.

McCoy looked shamefaced for a moment and then waved them in Sam's face.

"About time you started pulling your weight."

He caught just a hint of a smile on Sam's face as he turned to the door. Sam's "Yes, sir" was warm and he could hear the smile in it.

Chapter Eight
"Earth Prelude"

As James T. Kirk rode the shuttle from the Orion flagship to the planet, he reflected on how long it had been since he last trod the green grass of home.

The refit of the ship had been one of his biggest problems. He had labored long and hard to have things the way he wanted them. And he had learned to explain everything to the curious Orions he worked with. He sometimes thought they got more in information for making their own ships better than he got for demanding the changes he wanted.

But it had been worth it. The testing series he insisted on were unheard of in Orion ship building. But the testing had shown the weaknesses and he had them corrected as well. The Orion's took copious notes on everything he said from then on.

Then the thrill of being in open space again. He hadn't realized just how much he had missed it. He was barely able to contain himself. The crew had been a major adjustment for him. The Orion way was built on strength. The strongest (and often the wiliest) rose in the ranks. For him to be Captain of that sailing zoo of carnivores taxed his patience as well as his strength.

It only took twice for him to cross the threshold between the Human "normal" and the Orion "normal" and forget the change in gravity to the Orion 2.5 macho norm to leave him with cracked ribs and strained muscles and ligaments. He had a sensor system installed which read his physiology and made lightning changes in case of emergency transit of those areas.

His crew ended up with a lot of strains and sprains from finding themselves suddenly leaping instead of walking. But they quit grumbling when he questioned their virility if such a small thing put them out of action. They learned to keep track of his movements and pass the word to changing sections before he got there.

Only once had he actually had to confront an angry Orion.

He had been touring the ship with his first officer, Tarl, when the sensor fed the information to the computer and the

gravity in the next section fell to Earth normal. Only one particularly brutish individual was affected. He had been away from his post and was trying to get back in position prior to their arrival when the gravity shifted. His last leap had carried him into a bulkhead and sat him on his posterior.

To make matters worse, Kirk had walked upon him very soon after that. The Orion, Gnall, had leaped up and caught himself before hitting the ceiling and went into a rage, advancing on Kirk with murder in his every move. Tarl had started to move to intercept him when Kirk had stopped him. Kirk had seen Gnall's unsteadiness and played on it. He dodged Gnall's first rush which carried him into a storage locker.

When the mad Orion had regained his feet, Kirk was already airborne and caught Gnall in the chest with both feet, crashing the larger being into the bulkhead head first. Kirk quickly stepped in and agilely dodging the clumsy swings of his brutish opponent made short work of disabling the dazed Gnall.

He had learned in watching past encounters between other Orions and calmly broke Gnall's left arm in two places. The pain mobilized Gnall, but he was stunned and off balance. Kirk executed a perfect round-a-bout and drove his foot hard into Gnall's face. His head snapped back and into the bulkhead a third time and the massive body slowly sunk to the floor, unconscious.

Kirk had tugged his uniform into place and turned to Tarl as if a minor point had been made and instructed him to have this trash removed. The other Orions had been suitably impressed and had steered clear of him.

His first officer, who was very strong, and also very wily, just commented to him when they were alone that he better make sure all his fights were in small rooms so he could continue to use the walls to do the hard work. Kirk had looked at him to see if a challenge was being issued and then laughed with Tarl.

But Tarl was by far the best of the group. He shook his head as he remembered the drills and how proud the Orions were that they had accomplished the difficult forms demanded by their new captain. Kirk had groaned at the miserable performance.

Luckily Tarl had seen what Kirk was striving for. He pushed his charges hard and, in their first encounter with a new species on the edge of their space, had been able to answer the attack and retaliate with only minor damage. After the bragging and the posturing had died down, Kirk had verbally whipped them down to size, showing how their inefficiency had almost lost the battle. Tarl had taken over and built them into a passable unit.

While they were in and refitting for the third time, Kirk had approached the Orion High Council about recruiting some of his old crew. The High Council had been incredulous. They thought Kirk was doing fantastic work with minimal damages and loss of life. They sent aboard a team of their top captains to test the crew and discovered the crew out performed every standard that had been set.

Kirk had been sent back out into space. And he had performed; exploring two new sections of space. Making allies of the new species they found there. The crew was even starting to shape up when they met the Klingon ship. The battle had been short, and the Klingon ship left before they had totally destroyed Kirk's ship because of the arrival of four Orion ships. They had to be towed back to space dock and repairs were extensive.

Kirk had again approached the High Council and had found help from an unexpected source. Gnall's father was on the High Council and Gnall testified before them how he had thought they were invincible. But how they were unable to follow their captain's orders properly. He showed them the performance records which placed Kirk's crew ahead of any other in the entire fleet. And he pleaded for training from some of Kirk's compatriots to make them worthy of their commander.

The debates were long and tedious but finally the Orion Ambassador to Earth was recalled and given the order to assist Kirk in any possible way to bring back some of Kirk's old crew. The shipwrights estimated a full month to have the ship back in operation. Tarl was placed in charge of the refit and Kirk spoke long with him before leaving for Earth.

Chapter Nine
"Progress on One Front"

Kirk got off the shuttle and realized the first problem he was going to have. He was an Earth national but working for the Orions, his first loyalty was assumed to have been transferred to them. Especially since he commanded one of their starships. He shook his head and waited in the line to have his documentation checked instead of moving through the check in as he was used to.

An hour later he boarded a skycab with two other businessmen and gave his destination; one of the local hotels. He spent the ride trying to ignore the talk of the other two men and learned a bit about the city. One of his marvels was at his loss of touch with this reality since his departure a year ago. Most everything was the same in some way. But different too in some small things.

He recognized the majority of the advertisements he saw stuck on every conceivable surface. But what in the world was a quintone? He made himself a mental note to ask Sulu when he caught up with him. Thinking of Sulu, he got out his quickpad and made a note to call him as soon as possible. He had just punched in the note when he noted the late hour.

One other thing he had to keep reminding himself was that he had no hold over any of these people anymore. He wasn't their boss in any way. McCoy was the only one he had spoken to since the trial. He didn't even really know what the other's thought of him since he had gotten them dismissed from Star Fleet and lost them the only life and careers they had worked so hard to get. He'd better have a good plan of action for contacting them since some of them might be ready to shoot him.

He got out of the cab and the doorman took his bag and Kirk followed him inside, stopping at the desk and telling the concierge his name. A moment later custody of his bag was transferred to a calmly dressed bellhop and he followed that young man to the eighty-first floor and his room. A few credits in

that worthy's hand and he was finally alone with his single bag and the bare necessities.

He looked around the room and sighed. Definitely not the accommodations of a Star Fleet Captain. No glitz. No frills. Just a bed and a desk and chair. The bell hop had placed his bag on the bed and Kirk moved to the chair and sat, pulling out his comm unit and punching up the contact information for Sulu he had programmed in before he landed.

And ran into another problem. Kirk's top-of-the-line, deluxe Orion comm unit wouldn't work here. Blocked by security. After trying five different ways to by-pass the security setup, he just threw the useless unit on the bed and picked up the comm unit provided by the hotel. It worked the first time and soon Kirk was talking to Sulu's night crew.

"I'm James T. Kirk and I want to leave a message for Hikaru Sulu."

There was a brief silence and then a mechanical answer. "Mr. Sulu has left for the day. Please call back during our normal business hours. Thank you."

The device disconnected and Kirk just stared at it a moment and then shrugged and put it down. He guessed that he'd be calling Sulu tomorrow. He thought about going downstairs to the bar and having a drink and something to eat and then yawned and let that make up his mind. A quick shower and he climbed between the sheets and was quickly asleep. The next morning dawned bright and clear. Kirk was quickly up and finally reached Sulu.

"Hikaru! It's Jim Kirk."

The miniature image paused and then retrieved its inscrutable look. "I didn't think you'd actually come back." There was a moment of silence. "What can I do for you, Jim?"

Kirk's smile faded slightly. "I want to buy you dinner," he finished on an upbeat note.

Sulu just looked at him for a moment. "I'm not sure we have anything to say to one another, Jim. What does this concern?"

Kirk's smile left entirely. This was going to be a tough sell. "Look, Hikaru, I know we parted on bad terms . . ."

Sulu barked a single laugh. “Bad terms? Is that how you’d describe it?”

Kirk began his gracious lines. “All of us took a hit back then. It was a bad time.”

Sulu blew up, anger twisting his features for a moment. “I lost my career! My whole career! Over fifteen years. I was up for Captain!”

Kirk knew he had to say something. He also knew that nothing he said would make much difference. “Sulu. At least have dinner with me and let me talk to you.”

Sulu looked away for a moment at the ceiling. He finally looked down again and nodded. “On one consideration. My boss attends with us.”

Kirk started, “I had hoped . . . “

But Sulu cut him off short. “No way. I remember how smooth talking you were. She will be insurance. I don’t think I’ll be swayed by your slick tongue, but with her there, I know things will go right. That’s final,” Sulu said a little loudly.

“You got it,” Kirk conceded. “How about the Top of the Mark at eight o’clock? Tomorrow night?”

Sulu took a deep breath. “We’ll be there.” He cut communications quickly before Kirk could say anything else. Then he frowned thinking that now all he had to do was talk Mary Ann into it.

Kirk depressed the cut circuit and muttered to himself, “Nice to be remembered.” He took a cautious sip of the drink he had mixed himself and thought of Montgomery Scott. Now there was someone who would appreciate a good drink like this and wouldn’t mind sitting down with an old comrade to drink it. Some of his eagerness returned as he found Scott’s comm code and pressed it in.

He took another sip, remembering some of their shore leaves. The comm unit buzzed twice and then Scotty’s familiar brogue answered, “Aye?”

“Scotty! It’s Jim Kirk.” The silence that stretched wasn’t encouraging. Kirk continued rapidly. “It’s been a long time!”

“Aye that it has.” Kirk could see the wily Scot remembering. “And what brings you to this part of the galaxy?” It

was a veiled reference that he was working for the Orions now. When they were a crew they had a few run-ins with a few ships and, although they had come out on top every time, they were still considered enemies.

"I'll be in your neck of the woods in a couple of days and hoped we could take an evening out to tip one. Maybe a dinner?"

The answer was a little slow in coming but the answer was welcome. "Aye. I could handle that. Let me know when you get in town and I'll see what I can set up." Kirk started to answer but the circuit was dead. He looked at the comm unit a moment but decided against calling back. He shrugged as he realized he had his answer. And it was positive. At least, more positive than Sulu's. He had clicked up Chekov's comm code when he did a brief calculation and realized that it was the middle of the night there. Not an auspicious time to call. He sighed, put away the comm unit and relaxed. He would call Chekov tomorrow. And Uhura as well.

Uhura. Kirk finished his drink and crawled into the luxurious bed. But sleep was a long time in coming.

Kirk's next morning started slowly and he decided to spend a little time in the hotel's exercise room. He dressed and followed the directions but found himself in a strange place peopled by very helpful people but no exercise equipment. He finally understood that the patrons of this hotel, as fine as it was, did not mean to actually break a sweat. Sufficient to tan and massage, sit in pools of water and vegetate, or sit in groups and sip drinks and get waited on unmercifully. Kirk left in disgust and dressed for the street and escaped.

And unconsciously got what he was looking for. He had decided to walk and enjoy the exercise stretching his legs a little. But his random turns had taken him to a less than nice section of the city and he hadn't noticed. His thirst was the first indication because it led him into a bar he might have hopped with Scotty but not without some kind of backup.

It was quiet and cool after the increasing heat outside. But it was quiet because all talking had ceased when he walked in the door. He hesitated but then just shrugged his shoulders and

went up to the bar. The little place wasn't crowded and he thought he might have been wrong. The bartender came over and dropped his rag on the bar and looked Kirk over.

"Whatever you have on tap." Kirk decided he'd drink his drink and leave. No sense in stirring up trouble and for some reason he had upset these people. The bartender brought his drink back in a nice tall glass and placed it in front of him and he paid for it, leaving enough for a tip. But he never got to drink it.

The nudge came from behind and knocked him forward and into the bar. He caught himself on his hands and slowly turned around. There were three of them, all about the same size. Unkempt and swaggering while standing in place. Kirk had seen a thousand of them. The middle one was obviously the leader of the rough group.

"Oh, excuse me, mate. How clumsy of me. Are you okay?" The voice had a lilt to it that reminded Kirk of the time he had spent in Scotland.

Kirk had heard it all too. That was universal. Somewhere his answer was going to be wrong and then they would all jump him at once. Suddenly he felt like taking a short-cut. So, he smiled, nodded and popped the middle one with a short jab that had a great deal of power behind it. The guy dropped like a rock. Kirk looked at the other two and smiled again.

"Oh. Sorry. That slipped." His look from man to man was inquiring and dared them to make a move. "It looks like your friend must have slipped." They looked down and then back at Kirk, unsure of just how to proceed now that their leader was heaped on the floor. Kirk turned his back on them and reached for his drink. The sound made him turn and he caught the right man's punch at the back of his head, continued the motion and brought it down sharply across the edge of the bar, breaking the bone and releasing his arm at the same time.

Everyone in the bar could hear the bone crack but it looked as if the guy had suddenly fell in love with the bar and was standing there hugging it. Kirk had completed the move and looked at the third man who held up both hands quickly. But as he turned back, the bartender tossed something to the third man

and Kirk turned back to him. He was holding a bung stick and looked like he knew how to use it as a weapon.

"You want to eat that?" Kirk asked quietly. The third man hefted the stick as he had undoubtedly had hundreds of times and just nodded. He accompanied the nod with a quick swing and Kirk had to duck. He grabbed the legs in the grungy jeans and heaved. The man cried out as he fell back but was up in an instant and charging back in. He looked to be the best of the three. At least the only one still standing.

The stick came around in a swift swipe that had Kirk jumping back to avoid the pointed end that the man had switched to. Kirk grabbed him by the back of his grimy shirt and his belt and raised him in the air and brought him down hard on his up moving knee. Not hard enough to break his back. Just directly into his kidney. The man's breath gushed out of him and he flipped as he rolled off Kirk's knee and landed on his stomach next to his first friend, groaning, gasping and losing all interest in the fight.

Kirk leaned over, picked up the stick and laid it at the man's head just by his mouth. Straightening up and turning back to the bar he checked the rest of the patrons to see if any more problems were coming up. And although all eyes were turned toward him no one was rising. But as he fronted the bar once more he stopped when he saw the small weapon in the hand of the bartender. The tiny hole in the barrel was lined up on his belly and it was steady as a rock.

"I just came in for a drink," he began but the weapon made a small move in his direction and he stopped.

"We don't like your kind in here," the bartender said very slowly but distinctly. Again the accent was Scottish.

Kirk frowned slightly and was curious. It didn't look like the bartender was going to shoot him unless he made a move. "What kind is that?"

"You aren't fooling me with that innocent look. You're wearing the colors of the republic. And the only ones that can do that are police." The brogue was getting thicker now as the bartender became more excited.

Kirk was speechless for a moment. He had been mistaken for many things but never for the police. He held up both hands and then carefully extracted his ID wallet that identified him as from off planet. He laid it on the bar and backed up so the bartender could read it.

The bartender carefully edged closer and reached out to pick up the wallet while he kept his eye on Kirk. He grabbed the wallet, lifted it to eye level as he backed up and held it so he could see Kirk and just shift his eyes slightly and read what Kirk was showing him. The bartender read the item and then backed up a little, so he could spend more time reading than checking Kirk.

"Kirk!" he exploded. "Yer name is Kirk?"

Kirk thought it interesting that the fact that his name was Kirk seemed to mean more than the fact that he was from off world. "Yes. James Kirk."

"Well 'nough said." He put away the weapon and turned to another at the bar. "Get that mess off me floor!" The man nodded and pointed to three others and they lifted the first and third man and carried them off. They eased up the man with the broken arm and he muttered, "A lucky one that." The bartender snorted and retorted, "If the deil find ye idle, he'll set ye tae wark!" Kirk laughed and the bartender looked at him. "Did ye understand that?"

"Aye. I've been to the old country and was shown around by Scotty at one time."

"Scotty? Was that his name now?" He took Kirk's old glass, emptied it and laid it behind the bar. Then he drew a mug of dark liquid and set it before him. "I knew a man named Scott once. Back in the old country. He was always follin with things."

"Sounds like Montgomery Scott," Kirk said as he raised the glass and saluted the bartender. The bartender was dumbfounded for a moment and then said slowly.

"Are ye knowin' Monty then?"

Kirk put his glass down and licked his lips. "Why yes. Scotty used to work for me once." Kirk frowned. "Many years ago." Kirk shook his head. "We toured Scotland for a week and he showed me my people and where they lived." Kirk eyed the

drink as he smacked his lips. “Now that’s got to be some of the best you’ve got!” He reached for the wallet and started to extract some credits, but the bartender stopped him.

“Bah! Put that away. Yer money’s no good in here.”

Kirk hesitated, torn between knowing that the man was a Scot and loved money and knowing that to insist on paying would insult him. He nodded. “Then let me do this. There’s been many a time I’ve needed a drink after a hard day’s toil and didn’t have the money. But being the kind of man you are, I’d bet that those men be friends of yours and that you’d give them a drink anyway and let them pay later if they could. Let me put a little in the kitty to help cover their drinks.” He raised a hand with several hundred credits in it, eyed the bartender and winked.

The sight of that much money overcame whatever the bartender was feeling otherwise and the money disappeared quickly into a box under the counter. The bartender eyed him warily. “Do ye have something in ye besides Scot?”

Kirk laughed. “The only thing Scotty and I found was just a terrible thirst that I haven’t always been able to slake.” This seemed to satisfy the older man and it became a merry afternoon. So merry, in fact, that Kirk forgot about his evening’s appointment and had to leave hurriedly to get back to the hotel and change. As he rode back to the hotel, he opened and downed a vial of instant anti-drunk. He hated the stuff because of its taste but it really worked. Before they reached the hotel, Kirk had shuddered his way through the cleansing of his misused body and alighted feeling much better than he should.

After a shower and a quick study on the computer of the company Sulu worked for and whether they had government contracts or not, Kirk sat back and relaxed for a moment plotting strategy. It had been over a year since he had seen Sulu, but he thought he remembered what made him tick. Kirk nodded, put his things away and headed out for the restaurant and the meeting.

Arriving first, he made sure the charges were all going to the Orion account that had been set aside for this and then made a few touches on the table, checking with the bar and buying a few things. The only point that worried him was Sulu’s boss. He

didn't know anything about her. Couldn't find anything on the computer even knowing her first name; not even her age.

As he was pondering his approach with her, he saw them enter just below. Sulu was gallant as ever, opening the door for her and waving her through in front of him. He could see that she was impressed with his manners and even more by the opulence of the restaurant. He thought and smiled to himself as the maître d' guided them upstairs. Kirk nodded to himself, smiled and shifted his seat to put her between them.

When they came off the stairway, Kirk waited a moment and then rose, knowing she would see him as well as Sulu. Sulu guided her over and made the introductions.

"Mary Ann Johnson, James T. Kirk." Kirk took the hand she had extended for a handshake and turned it as he raised it to his lips, brushing his lips across it as he bowed. He smiled and said, "So pleased to meet you." She was a bit flustered for a moment, not being used to the gesture, but liking it.

"Uh, nice to meet you, too. Hikaru has spoken much about you," she finished.

Kirk made a show of wincing. "You should approach any new meeting with an open mind," he said as he smiled. He deftly seated her at the table and took the seat to her right, leaving Sulu the seat to her left. Sulu frowned for a moment and then sat warily, looking at Kirk the whole time.

"Perhaps a pre-prandial drink. A white wine for you?" he asked Mary Ann as he reluctantly released her hand.

Mary Ann was flustered again and could only nod. Kirk looked to Sulu and suggested, "A Denebian brandy?" Sulu was startled by the suggestion of the potent but very smooth drink he hadn't tasted since his days with Kirk. But he recovered and nodded rather regally. Kirk smiled at the ubiquitous water and said, "And I'll have the brandy as well."

The waiter nodded, said quietly, "Very good, sir," and left. Kirk smiled at Mary Ann and turned his attention to Sulu. "I understand you're designing the latest advances in navigation systems. Have you incorporated those changes you wish you'd had aboard the Enterprise?"

Sulu was stunned for a moment that Kirk would bring up the Enterprise and then thoughtful as he weighed the security involved. He pulled a device from his pocket, spread the stubby arms and activated the device. Kirk knew that it would block all recording devices and microphones. As long as they didn't speak about anything specific . . . "Yes. I have incorporated some of those ideas."

Kirk nodded at the device and turned to Mary Ann to keep her involved. "The only one I can bring to mind now is shifting the shield controls to that area above the activation keys instead of having to drop your hand so low for them. A much faster and more common-sense approach. I had to agree with Sulu on that."

He could almost see the wheels at work in her head as she considered before she spoke. "Yes. That was a very valuable change. I agree it was a very common-sense development. I wish we had thought of it years ago." There was a pause as the waiter delivered their drinks. And Mary Ann spoke before Kirk could. "I understand that you've been working off planet."

Kirk sipped briefly at his brandy to give himself a moment. He didn't have anything to hide. He put the drink down and nodded. "Yes. Way, way off planet. In the Rosetta Sector, primarily." Kirk sipped twice at his brandy to give them both a moment to consider that and all it meant.

He put his glass down and swallowed as Sulu commented. "Rosetta? Isn't that claimed by the Orions?" Kirk nodded. "Then you're working for the Orions now?"

Kirk nodded. "Have been for almost a year. Couldn't resist the call of space."

"You've been on a ship for the Orions." It wasn't hard to hear the distaste in Sulu's voice. "What post?"

"Captain. That's what made it so appealing." Kirk paused. "Of course, I had to have a few conditions."

"Conditions? Why? What type of duty do you do?"

"Mostly exploratory. As we did on the Enterprise." Kirk's frequent references to the Enterprise were to make Sulu think about it and remember his time in space. "Of course, we do meet

up with the occasional Klingon. That sector does border their own claimed territory."

Sulu was definitely getting interested now. Mary Ann was following the conversation and the direction the conversation that she had started was taking but wasn't contributing. Sulu asked offhandedly, "Any confrontations?"

Kirk smiled. "More every day. The Klingons don't like the Orions any more than they do the Federation. But when they found out I was there, they seem to seek out my ship. Some of the bat . . . confrontations have been pretty fierce." Kirk paused. "That crew just can't seem to react as quickly as we used to. Even with the best equipment, we have to crawl back sometimes." Kirk shook his head and sipped again.

The warrior blood was starting to heat up in Sulu's veins now. He breathed deeply and continued. "Ever run across any Federation ships in space?" Sulu continued innocently.

Kirk shook his head and signaled the waiter. "That was one of the conditions. No contact with the Federation. No operating in any space that they traveled in regularly." He stopped and gestured to the waiter. "Perhaps we should order." Kirk turned to Mary Ann. "I had thought you might like the Bernean Tournadoes."

Mary Ann was unfamiliar with it and turned to Sulu for advice. Sulu smiled and nodded. "You will love it." He turned to the waiter. "I think she would like the Federation version."

The waiter started to speak and then just nodded. "And you sir?"

Sulu considered and then looked over at Kirk. Mary Ann was looking at Sulu and did not see Kirk made a 'hand held' signal to Sulu with a nod at Mary Ann. Sulu nodded in decision. "I'll have a Serilian steak in the Federation style as well." The waiter nodded and looked at Kirk.

"I'll have the same. And we need a couple of orders of oysters on the half shell while we wait."

"With the full condiment tray, sir?"

"Yes. And Antillian Tea water all around with the meal."

"Of course, sir. And a refill on your present drinks?"

Looking at each of their nods, Kirk turned to the waiter and nodded. “Yes.”

“Very good sir.”

Kirk reached for his drink as the waiter left and Mary Ann commented, “So what would make your ship work better? Better equipment?” She was obviously speaking of her new equipment, but Kirk was already shaking his head.

“No. We have the best equipment. What we need is something or someone to light a fire under my crew to make them perform.” Kirk sighed. “They think they’re doing well. And for Orions they are doing well. But they don’t have anything to shoot for. I mean I can do just a hair better than they can. But it needs someone who has the drive to use that equipment to its max!”

Kirk paused. “Sorry. I let things run away from me sometimes.”

“So better equipment wouldn’t do any good?” Mary Ann continued. It was obvious that her company wouldn’t sell to him or the people he worked for, but she was trying to test anyway.

Kirk shook his head again. “No. We have the Argus Six installed. They just can’t come up to full speed on it.” The Argus Six was the unit that Sulu had designed. It was the latest offering of her company. It was back-ordered and unattainable. It was exclusively Star Fleet. She was shocked into silence, but Sulu picked up on it.

“But that unit was especially designed for Star Fleet. Maybe your conversion to make it work on your ship slowed it down.” Sulu was probing as well.

“No conversion necessary,” Kirk shook his head.

Now Sulu was shocked speechless. For there to be no conversion necessary would mean that the ship was . . . “You have a Constitution Class vessel?” Sulu managed to gasp out.

Kirk nodded again. “And I know what you’re going to say. It won’t be the best until the software version six point eight is installed. But that’s equipment. I tell you it’s the people themselves. They’re putting in that version now. But it won’t make much difference. It’s the people.”

Just then the oysters and the drinks arrived, and Kirk gave them time to partake of both to give them time to think. They took

the time but ate slowly. Both trays of oysters were finished when Mary Ann was ready. She could see the draw of space travel on Sulu. He was already the test navigator for all new systems they put out. But it wasn't the same as being out with the controls in your hands and away from all help.

"So it really is the training that you're looking for," she managed as she tried to put out the fire of the horseradish she had seen Kirk use and tried herself, with her wine. It wasn't doing the job.

Kirk looked directly at Sulu and nodded. "Yes. I need someone like you that has that fire and drive. That can show people the practical part of the operation of the equipment because you know it so well and give them some drive at the same time. Something better that they can shoot for." There was some of the drive in Kirk's voice as he spoke.

And Sulu was really torn. It was obvious from his silence that he was considering it. Finally he shook his head. "I have too many responsibilities here. We have a new material we're developing for a possible problem . . ."

Kirk broke in quickly. "The conduit lining on the navigation console that has the potential to burn out after constant use for over an hour?" Kirk paused as Sulu and Mary Ann shared a look. "I think it's going to take you almost a year to make that discovery. That type of development is very slow. I know because we've already developed a similar product that has passed every test we put it through in another system that uses more power for a much longer period. Finished it a year ago. It's being put in the navigation console conduits as we speak."

Sulu was shaking his head again, but Mary Ann was nodding. She spoke first. "So the navigator aboard your ship would have access to that material as well. He could possibly learn about it?" Sulu was looking at her warily as she finished.

"My navigator, a full commander, would have complete access to the computer system where that information is stored." Kirk commented to his glass before he drank.

"And he would probably have the opportunity to test that navigation equipment under actual day-to-day usage," Mary Ann continued.

“Undoubtedly right into a, uh, confrontation with the Klingons,” Kirk finished the thought.

Both were quiet now and looked at Sulu. Sulu had other visions clouding his eyes and didn’t see them looking at him. Finally, he reacted to the silence and looked at both of them. “What?” They both laughed. Sulu looked at her. “Are you saying that’s it’s alright for me to go?”

She nodded. “Sounds like an excellent opportunity to get some research done and get some valuable knowledge. She paused as she looked at her drink. “Of course, it’s up to you.” She sipped at her wine as the waiter came back with the entrees. The table was silent until the waiter left. Mary Ann looked at her plate in astonishment. “A hamburger?”

Sulu came out of it and smiled. “No. Those are the Tournadoes. They’re pieces of meat arranged in the Federation style. For Federation read on a bun. Try it. You’ll love it. They are so tender.” He kissed his bunched fingers.

Mary Ann eyed it warily and picked up the bun. “If it isn’t good, I don’t care what kind of place this is. You’re going to wear it!” Sulu just looked at her, cocking one eyebrow, and she finally sighed and took a tentative bite. In a few seconds, her eyes lit up and she tried to speak around the mouthful. A moment later, she swallowed and grinned. “That’s better than Johnnies’ by a mile. That’s so tender!”

Silence wrapped the table as they ate. Then Mary Ann picked up her glass and eyed the contents. “A beer?” Sulu just gave her the eye and she nodded and tried it. She nodded. “That’s some sweeter than beer.” Silence descended again as they finished up. Finally, they sat back and finished their ‘tea’. Sulu finally broke the silence looking at Kirk. “Are you going to strand me on some planet at the end of nowhere?”

“I promise I won’t. But that doesn’t mean much in space. You know that.”

“Do I get paid for this?” Sulu said in a grouchy voice.

“Three times your civilian salary here.” Kirk responded.

“And since you’ll be collecting data for the company, you’ll get your pay here too. I’ll collect it myself.”

“How long? A year?”

“Depends. Probably six months, tops.”

Sulu sighed. “How long before we leave?”

“When I call, you’ll have a week.”

Sulu stuck out his hand and Kirk shook it. An hour later Kirk was back at his hotel and packing for the trip to see Scotty.

Chapter Ten
"A Wee Bit of Heaven"

Kirk exited the shuttle and went to the first transporter stage he saw. The Orions were paying for this trip and he would enjoy a couple of luxuries. Minutes later he was in his hotel and registered. A very helpful bellhop insisted on carrying his one piece of luggage, so he had company to his room. The man was a little older than the usual people trying their talents as bellhops and Kirk engaged him in conversation.

"Much to do around here after work?" Kirk opened.

"Aye," came the immediate response. "What is it ye have in mind?"

The brogue was thick enough to cut with a knife. "Perhaps a bit of Porter's with some quiet to think with." The name Porter's had come from his pub experience at his last stop. It was one of the preferred ales consumed after a hard day's work and it practically identified him as a Scot.

He got a quick hard glance from the bellhop, but it was gone in an instant. "Porter's, eh. I know a couple of places where they favor Guinness." It was a test. Guinness was good but considered a woman's drink by the regular working men.

Kirk gave him a slow up and down and then looked back ahead as he answered. "Ye don't look like the namby-pamby kind. Or is it the women yer chasin'?"

The older man drew himself up as he turned, and Kirk shifted his feet to absorb the charge. But the laugh that came next made him smile instead. "Monty warned me ye'd be getting' wise to me quickly!"

"He sent you?" Kirk asked surprised.

"Nae. He just warned me. We've talked about ye a great deal and he knew I'd want to check you out meself." He looked Kirk square in the eye. "Monty's a good friend. I wouldn't want to see him hurt or worried." The look turned into almost a glare. "Do ye get my ken now laddie?"

Kirk squared off himself and returned the look. "Aye. Scotty doesn't make friends easily. But he does make them well."

Then he smiled and extended his hand. “I’m glad he has a friend in you.” The man hesitated for a moment, then grasped Kirk’s hand in a firm grip and smiled as well. “Tell Scotty I’ll see him tomorrow evening,” Kirk finished.

“Why not tell him yerself? He’s waitin’ for ye now.” A look of surprise flashed across Kirk’s face. “He’s in yer room.”

The elevator dinged, and they turned front and exited. The bellhop led him to his room and opened the door for him. As promised, Scotty was waiting within.

Kirk stepped in the room and stopped. Not at the sight of Scotty. He had a little penalty weight. But not more than Kirk really expected. He was a little whiter and thinner in the hair instead of the gray shag that Kirk had been used to. But he looked older somehow. More lines in his face or something.

But the thing that made him stop was not knowing what kind of reception he was going to get. They had shared some good times in the past. But it was just that, the past. The whole situation had changed now. Not only didn’t Scott work for him, he was a prominent man in his own right. And most telling, Kirk was visiting as a representative of a foreign planet. An enemy planet.

But, to Kirk’s surprise, Scotty rose at the sight of him and came forward with outstretched arms. Kirk quickly recovered and hurried forward himself. They met in a shout of joy as only two old friends can make. There was much pounding of backs, holding at arm’s length and looking each other over.

Finally they released each other and sat, Kirk on the edge of his chair. It was half elation at the reception and half nerves. Because now the difficult part was coming up. His stomach churned for a moment and he swallowed quietly.

Scotty looked over at him and smiled. “I know that ye work for the Orions now. But if I’m any judge, it’s a long way from here.”

Kirk nodded as he spoke. “A star ship in the space on the other side of their empire. Never an incursion into Federation space. No contacts.”

“And yer Keptin, eh?” Scott continued.

“Yes. Since that space borders on the Klingon space, there is plenty of squabbling and posturing.” Kirk shook his head.

“Although a few times we had to high tail it out of there before we became space dust.”

The bellhop brought three glasses and a smoky bottle that looked very old. “Ah! ‘Tis a wee bit o heaven we’ll be havin’.” Scott took a moment to introduce the probing bellhop. “This is Jim Magilicutty. He’s my P.E.”

Kirk looked slight confused. “P.E.?”

Scott laughed. “Practical Engineer. I dream up these fantastic projects. He’s the guy that looks them over, tells me what they need to make them work, tells me when we haven’t developed something we’d need yet.” Scott laughed again. “He’s the guy that brings me down to earth again.” Kirk knew how valuable that type of individual could be in saving time and useless effort. They had to be very knowledgeable too.

“Jim and I met in the elevator.” Kirk smiled at Jim.

Scott looked over at Jim. “And he made ye, didn’t he?”

Jim laughed as well. “That he did! But he did say I didn’t look namby-pamby!”

Scott shook his head. “I told him ye would. Bet he offered you the Guinness.”

They all shared a look and then laughed.

“Did they have ye out shipped?” Scott asked to bring the talk back.

And Kirk knew just what he meant. In their years together, they had run across a few ships that had out classed them in almost all regards. “Just in the crew. It’s a good ship. Most of the latest innovations, like the Mark Seven dilithium processor with the series eight upgrades. A good ship.”

“Aye,” Scott said slowly as he thought. “Those are pretty current upgrades alright.” Scott’s brow furrowed for a moment. “Then ye must have a Constitution class vessel. They’re the only ones that use the series eight upgrades. Unless the Orions have developed some souped-up ships.”

Kirk shook his head. “No. They’ve stolen everything they have. It was a trade-off with the Romulans who had captured the Columbus. The Romulans let them have the ship when they were caught by surprise. The Federation crew is on a trade world. All alive I understand but couldn’t verify. They won’t let me in that

sector of their space." Kirk shook his head. "The sad part is that they can't make use of half of the technology they've stolen."

"Beyond their ken?" Scott queried.

"Partly. Part of it is they don't have the reactions for the speed that goes with that advanced equipment. Theirs is a race of very powerful people. But not very fast. There's the occasional quick individual. But those don't have the technological savvy."

"Who runs things then? Generally speaking most of their deals are pretty slick. They must have someone who has half a brain."

Kirk laughed. "They have a whole class of people. Kind of a nobility. They're a rare combination of speed, strength and smarts. They run everything. All the phases of their government and all their ships. If they had more of them, they really would be a force to contend with."

Scott was quiet a moment and Kirk just let the silence stretch. Finally, Scott looked up and turned to face him more fully. "I take it this isn't just a social call."

Kirk nodded to himself and took a breath. "No, it's not." He looked Scott directly in the eye and continued. "I need you, Scotty." Kirk held up a hand to forestall the answer he knew would be coming. "I need an engineer. But I need a capable one."

Kirk shook his head. "Let me give you an example. If you were in the engine room and the dilithium sequencer failed what would happen?"

Scott frowned slightly. "The tech on duty would start the diagnostics, find out what was wrong, get the part from stores and repair it."

"But without the sequencer the ship would lose power," Kirk pressed.

"Well naturally ye'd switch to the standby first. If ye had things set up right, it should give you an alarm and switch over by itself." Scotty shook his head at the obvious and then frowned as he looked at Kirk again. "They didn't!"

Kirk sighed. "We have two spare sequencers. We were at the Klingon border and had a Klingon D-5 in sensor range when it went out. They weren't set to switch automatically. It did give an alarm. I left the Exec with the bridge and went below. You

couldn't hear yourself think with all the alarm racket. The tech was taking apart the sequencer when I got there. He couldn't hear the hailing circuit over the noise. I had to search for the manual switcher but had the whole thing done in less than a minute."

Kirk shook his head. "I did some checking after the situation developed and went away. The crew in the engine room had one man that knew how the sequencers were supposed to be set up. But he was also the only man that could change and align the dilithium chamber itself. That was scheduled for completion in two months and he was getting the parts together from stores. The training was set up for six weeks in the future. Right after the space evacuation training and the first aid training."

"And where was the Chief Engineer!" Scotty asked indignantly.

"The one that was gone was the Chief Engineer. He's the only one that had a clue how everything was supposed to work." Kirk held up a hand again. "Before you ask, he wasn't the one who set up the schedule of training. The administrative assistant did that."

Scott opened his mouth to speak in outrage twice but closed it each time. Finally he got up, went out on the balcony and closed the door behind him. Kirk looked after him and then looked at Jim with an unspoken question.

"You want him, don't you?"

"Yes."

"He wants out of here so bad he can taste it. He gets to try out all his ideas here. And between us, we have some wonderful things going." Jim shook his shaggy head. "But it's a different type of challenge from space. It's one thing to design all these things. But in space it's many times just you between the whole ship fulfilling its mission and failing into space dust. I've been there myself and there's nothing like the thrill of using what you've learned to make things right. And even trying a few things that shouldn't work but making them work when ye have to. It's a whole different world. I think he's ready for it again. What would the pay be?"

“Probably twice what he gets here. The Orions steal everything so they don’t mind paying for the people with the knowledge to make it all work.”

Just then Scott came back in and stopped in front of Kirk. “How long would I have?”

“How long? As long as you need.”

“Sounds good then. When do we leave?”

Kirk stood and looked at his old friend. “What about pay. And benefits? And all that stuff. Don’t you worry about that?”

Scotty smiled. “I don’t think you’ve come this far to leave me hangin’. As long as they have a galley and some spare parts when I need them there’s only one condition I have.”

“Name it,” Kirk demanded.

“Jim here gets to go with us at double his pay.” Scott nodded at Jim.

Kirk looked over at Jim and that worthy was showing his approval by almost being in tears. “Done!” Kirk said turning back to Scotty. “I’ll be contacting you in a week or two. It’ll be a week after that.” They shook hands and finished a few more drinks. And a few more drinks and several stories, Jim contributing his own. He knew that the lowering level in the Bit of Heaven was going to give him a hell of a headache tomorrow. And then a few more drinks. And Kirk barely made it back to his hotel to pack and get ready to travel to Chekov’s location.

Chapter Eleven
"Secure!"

The air was crisp and clear, and Jim Kirk breathed deeply as he stepped out of the shuttle in front of an imposing building of dark gray stone. As he looked up and down the empty street, the shuttle drew away and disappeared around a corner. The wall in front of him was blank and he hefted his bag of essentials and looked again for the entrance to the hotel.

The trip out to this corner of the planet had been uneventful. The only difference had been when he had picked up his bag at the transport office. He had shown his ID and paperwork and been asked to wait for a few moments. He presumed they were checking because he was representing an Orion company and was obviously a human. And when they had come back, they had been quite effusive in their apologies and had arranged a private shuttle to take him to the hotel.

The shuttle ride had been rather long, but he had occupied himself looking at the scenery through the spacious windows. The colorful scenes of the local businesses had absorbed him in trying to identify their products. He had been unsuccessful in many instances. Must have been his off-planet time and the changes in customs and mores. He had shaken his head and became absorbed in making some notes on his datapad for his meeting with Chekov, which had been scheduled for tomorrow morning.

He had been outside the shuttle before he noticed the barrenness of his present location. He had queried the still open shuttle but that automated device had cheerfully assured him that this was the correct location and then moved off.

With little choice, he shrugged and started for the corner. But the other side of the building he was standing next to was as blank as the side he had left. He examined the street around him and returned to the corner and looked again. Each building seemed to occupy the full block that it sat on and was completely featureless. No doors and no windows.

It was as he stood there that he saw a man in non-descript clothes step from the side of the building and start across the street. He hailed him, but the man looked in his direction, saw him and hurried back to the same side of the building and disappeared as he spoke into something attached to his wrist. Kirk moved quickly down there but the entire wall was as featureless as it had been when the shuttle had dropped him here. He reached into his haversack and pulled out his Orion communications device. It may be useless as a comm device, but it had other capabilities.

He changed the settings, scanned the blank wall and almost grunted in satisfaction when it showed him a shielded area a few feet down. He moved to it, scanned again, made an adjustment and scanned again. There was a protected area almost six feet wide with a featureless shield over it. He quickly changed the settings on his hand-held device, scanned again and then boldly stepped forward.

There was no feeling of resistance as he passed into a vestibule of some sort. He used his comm unit to find the passcode and then continued into the building. The lighting inside was different and he glanced back and saw that the street outside showed the sunlight. He shifted his grip, reset the device as a detector and moved forward into the building. The hallways were white with occasional doors. He paused and tried one, but it was locked. The next one he tried opened easily and he discovered a plain room with a desk, a chair and a computer console.

He put his comm unit in his haversack and sat at the console. He examined the setup but could discern nothing obvious. It appeared to be a standard keyboard and he hit the clear key and was rewarded with a shifting screen that resolved itself into a query. What did he wish to know?

He quickly typed in, ‘Where am I?’ and pressed the query key. The answer came back quickly.

‘You are in building five, room 167 of the Planitin project. What do you wish to know?’

Kirk thought for a moment and typed, ‘Where is Pavel Chekov?’ The answer came back quickly,

‘Commissar Chekov is located in his office in the Martina street offices. What do you wish to know?’

‘Communicate with Pavel Chekov.’

‘Communication not possible with this device. Suggest using attached comm unit.’ Kirk knew he hadn’t missed a comm unit but looked anyway. There was no comm unit in the whole room much less attached to the computer.

‘No comm unit attached. Need other suggestion for communication with Pavel Chekov.’

‘Communication not possible with this device.’ This last blinked on the screen twice and then remained solidly displayed. Kirk pondered for a moment then removed the cover on the computer and searched inside. He saw almost immediately what he needed and reached for his own Orion communicator. Dismantling it was more difficult without tools but he managed.

The Federation type systems recognized it as an off-planet device. But if he removed the speaker and the transtator device, which the Orions had stolen from the Federation anyway, he should be able to tap into the comm line in the computer by hooking up with a transtator bridge circuit which he could extract from his comm unit and then hook the two together, making the sub-space frequency connection before the transmogrification unit which was Klingon and . . .

His fingers made the last connection and he rapidly typed on the computer, ‘Comm unit engaged. Make computer connection using attached comm unit to Pavel Chekov’s computer.’

The computer clicked and whirred as it checked things out. *‘Communications possible with Pavel Chekov’s computer. Input security code now.’*

That gave Kirk pause. A security code? How could he determine . . . Wait. Pavel. If he inputted the correct code for Pavel’s computer, it would probably be a master code that allowed communications everywhere on the network. Kirk was deep in thought and didn’t hear the door open behind him. Or the extension of the stun device in the tall man’s hand.

Kirk had just started to type when he became aware of the hazy green nimbus of the discharge of the stun device. He barely

had time to think “damn” before he slipped to the floor, unconscious. The man entered, closed the door, extracted a comm unit of his own and made a call. Moments later, he closed the unit, put it away and sat in the chair to watch the unconscious body at his feet.

Kirk quickly opened his eyes but didn’t move. He could see the walls on two sides of him with no mark or blemish and looking almost polished. The third wall, which he was facing, had a large central aperture. As he watched, there was a very slight flicker and Kirk realized he was in a maximum level security cube with the opening guarded by a force field.

He slowly sat up and the effects of the stun made his stomach clench in pain. His right shoulder hurt a little and he worked it to limber it up, judging correctly that he had fallen on it when stunned. As he moved his arm, he gradually turned in a complete circle and looked over his prison.

And prison it was as he determined by feeling the slick, white plastic walls. His circuit of the room brought him to the force field and he gently tapped a finger against it. A mild tingling became a more urgent pulsing as he pressed harder against the invisible confinement. Yes. A security cube like the one he had on the star ship.

His eyes darted about and focused on the camera in the ceiling outside the cube and completely inaccessible to him. He had examined these cubes when they had been his. He had imprisoned Spock within one once to see if a flaw existed. None had. Kirk turned and faced the back wall as he smiled and considered. Once he, Spock and McCoy had been imprisoned within one. And they had escaped.

They had escaped through the overhead though. Without looking up, he gauged the distance to the overhead now and judged it to be nine feet just as he remembered. But he didn’t have Spock’s shoulders to sit on here. Then his eye fell on the bunk he had been laying on and he smiled again.

He wandered around the cube a number of times and finally sat on the bunk looking sad and discouraged. He calculated that whoever had imprisoned him here would want to

watch him to see if he could escape and then come and talk to him in person. He might be able to glean some information from them that way. He certainly wouldn't try anything until then.

Two men appeared about two hours later with a tray of food. The first stood square in the middle of the aperture drew his weapon and pointed it at Kirk. "Please stay seated until the tray has been placed inside and the force field is re-energized. In you move you will be stunned." He was quiet, and Kirk noted that the other man stood over at his own left side as he manipulated the field with the security code.

Kirk was barely aware of an almost subliminal hum that ceased and knew that the force field had been deactivated. Kirk nodded to himself as the second man picked the tray back up and came through the opening by the first man. The weapon never varied from its target of his body mass. The second man placed the tray on the floor, stood and exited. Seconds later the hum was back, and Kirk knew the force field was back in place

They didn't stay but left immediately. Kirk sighed loudly, went and retrieved the tray and sat back on his bunk. He picked listlessly at his food for a few moments and then looked up sharply. He glanced around the cube and then started eating again. After a moment he looked up again and looked around. He pretended to find the camera outside and stood with the tray and looked around the room as if he was disturbed about something.

He went to the side of the cube into an area that the camera couldn't see and stood there for a few minutes and then went back to his bunk and looked around again, ending with looking at the camera. In getting up again he rocked the bunk with his leg and looked at it as he stood with the tray. He looked at the camera angrily and then put the tray on the floor, dragged the bunk to the left-hand wall and then got the tray and sat down. When the guard appeared a few minutes later, Kirk looked up and glared but then went back to his food. The guard checked the rest of the cube, nodded to himself and left.

A half hour later, Kirk finished the food and the drink and looked around. He placed the tray on the floor just inside the force field but closer to the other side and then sat back down. An hour later, he looked up from his apparent stupor and around the

cube again. He pushed the bunk completely against the wall and lay down facing the wall. He was asleep when the guards came, and he felt the hum stop and then restart. He was sure that they had him covered with the weapon every second.

The next morning, three guards came, shackled him and led him to a fresher. They left him alone for thirty minutes and then came back and checked every item in the fresher to make sure nothing had been stolen. Then they took him back to his cell. He noted that his bunk had been moved but was still against the sidewall. He sat sullenly and waited. An hour later, he was fed again and then, when they came for the tray, a woman accompanied them.

After the tray had been removed, he was checked again for anything they might have missed. Then the force field was back in place, a chair was brought for the woman and positioned at the outside of the aperture. Kirk turned to her and waited.

She referred to several sheets of paper on a clipboard. “Your papers identify you as James Kirk, a representative of the Orion worlds. Is this true?”

“Yes.” Kirk had decided to keep his answers to a minimum and gather as much information as possible.

“Why are you here?” the woman asked and looked at him.

“Here?” Kirk took her literally and looked around the cube briefly. “I don’t know!” he stated belligerently.

“Calm down now, Kirk. I didn’t mean this cell. I meant this planet. “Why are you here?” She looked at him quietly.

He seemed confused at first, glanced quickly around and then, like he’d made up his mind: “I’m from Earth originally. I, uh, came to visit an old friend.” This last was more positively.

She laughed. “A friend is it? And what is this friend’s name?”

Kirk hesitated and then stated positively, “Pavel Chekov.”

She nodded. “Yes. This agrees with what we found of your clumsy efforts when we captured you. Did you find him?”

Kirk looked confused again and hesitantly replied. “You know I didn’t.” Then more positively. “You people have put me in here without reason! I was just trying to contact my friend!”

She laughed again. “Contact your friend. Did you contact him to let him know you were coming? To make sure he was here? So you would know you could reach him when you arrived?” The questions came quickly and harder. She looked at him again but with a more dubious expression than before, her head cocked to one side.

Kirk looked as though he had been caught in a lie then recovered. “No.” Then more positively. “No! I was going to surprise him. It’s been a long time. I wanted to surprise him.” She smiled, completely in control, as Kirk showed his prepared background. “I didn’t really want to disturb him if he was busy. I was on planet doing some business and decided to stop by. And surprise him!”

She laughed briefly again. “I’m sure it would have been a great surprise.” The smile disappeared as she looked him in the eye and glared. “And just what part of the surprise was trying to access his computer from inside one of our most secure locations!” Kirk opened his mouth to respond but then shut it again. “Come on, Kirk! You were inside a location that has a masked entrance, requires a pass code to enter, in a room that just happened to be unoccupied and tearing apart a computer that leads into our secure network! What were you doing, Kirk? Who are you?”

Kirk looked at her as his mind apparently raced. Then he folded his arms across his chest and stared straight ahead. “I demand to see my ambassador! I claim to be a diplomat and require my embassy!”

“Your embassy? There is only one person in your embassy. The Ambassador. And the Ambassador left off planet for two weeks. You will remain here for that time and then we will contact him. If you weren’t claiming diplomatic immunity, I would turn you over to the local police. I still may and let them worry with you!” She stood and quickly walked away.

Kirk looked after her for a moment and then wandered quickly about the cube, feeling the walls, thumping them to catch an echo, acting like he was frantically searching for a way out and then later sitting on his bunk for hours when he hadn’t found one.

When they brought his meals, he tried to talk to the guards, but they were obviously under orders to ignore him. And getting no response, he soon gave up after a day and spent almost all his time sitting on the bunk where it sat on the side wall, sleeping or gazing out the force field longingly. He never bothered his guards again and just stayed dejected and lonely all the time, sitting on his bunk.

After the evening meal on the second day, he waited until the guards had retrieved the tray and then came back an hour later to check him on their rounds. He pretended to sleep. Once they had made their second round he quickly got up but stayed close to the front wall and out of sight. He propped the bunk on its end and clambered up it. He lifted the tile one out from the wall, peaked above it and saw the wiring running down to the control outside his door.

He carefully climbed into the ceiling and over the laser detector that ran by the wall. He traced the cable back to a connection box, opened it and found the leads, disconnected the ceiling laser and then the force field. The hum gone, he climbed down, put the bunk down, pretended to sleep and waited for the guards to make their next rounds. As soon as they had checked on him and before they could get back to their central control space, he was out of the cube.

He waited ten minutes, so they could get comfortable in their space again, found the storage area with his belongings, found the exit, determined it was wired to prevent break-ins and not exits and left. He hustled in a straight line until he had reached civilization and then caught a ride to a local hotel.

He cleaned up, changed clothes, went out again and rode to the location where he had determined Chekov's office was. Breaking into the office area was easy. He found Chekov's office and settled in to wait in a chair in the corner and out of the way. He didn't have long to wait.

He heard Chekov and the girl long before they entered his office. They stopped in the secretary's office while Pavel answered the comm unit, receiving another report on his escape and then hanging up.

“Who is this Orion we had detained? Why wasn’t I notified? How long have you been holding him?” Pavel was definitely upset. More by being left out of the loop than by the fact she locked someone up.

“He wasn’t an Orion,” she started.

“Not an Orion? But they just reported that he was waiting to see the Orion ambassador,” Chekov interrupted.

“You are going to be upset but I will tell you anyway. We found him in the Planitin Village, inside one of the buildings tapping into the computer system.”

“Inside one of the buildings?” Chekov’s voice had risen with each word but now he calmed down. “Please don’t tell me his name was Jim Kirk.” Her quiet revived him and he started again. “You had James Kirk locked up in one of our maximum-security cubes!”

“Now Pavel. He escaped just this morning. We have a search set up all through the complex, but they haven’t turned him up yet.”

Chekov shook his head and held out his hand. “Give me your weapon please.”

“What?” she asked in surprise.

“Give me your weapon. Please!” He reiterated more strongly. She was hesitant but withdrew her weapon from its holder and handed it to him.

“Why do you want my weapon, Pavel?” she asked quietly.

“So you don’t shoot me by accident when we go in my office,” he replied quietly. He held up a hand to stop her further questions. “Please go in my office and just look around. Don’t get excited. Just look around.”

“What would I get excited about? We checked security on the way in and everything was as it should be,” she continued.

“Yes.” He motioned to the door. She shrugged and walked into the office and looked around. She turned back to him questioningly. He simply stood by the door, reached over and flipped on the light. She waited and he said, “I don’t know for sure, but I think I would sit in that corner,” he indicated with a finger, “while I waited.”

She turned to the corner and then sucked in her breath and clutched for her missing weapon as she caught sight of Kirk. She turned quickly to Chekov but then calmed as she noted him standing calmly and leaning against the door frame.

He finally turned to Kirk. “Been waiting long, Jim?”

“Just a couple of hours. I figured they’d get you up right away when I went missing. The cube wasn’t bad, but I like the décor here much better,” Kirk finished and then looked at her. “Good morning, Katrina.”

She looked back and forth between them and then finally at Chekov. “You knew who it was. How did you know?” she inquired with frowning face. “And that he was here now?”

“When you told me that someone broke in to the Planitin project, didn’t steal anything and got caught in a room without the door locked, I had a suspicion. But when I heard that he had escaped from one of the cubes, I knew it had to be Jim. As to him being here, this must have been where he was heading all along when you caught him, so where else would he be?”

Chekov turned to Kirk. “Did that old transport leave you by the building?” Kirk nodded. “We bought that whole area when the hotel burnt down. They’ve had a problem with that one transport leaving people at the old hotel location. They’ve tried reprogramming it but it keeps going back.”

Chekov took his place behind his desk. “But you didn’t travel all this way to talk about that transport.”

“No.” Kirk glanced at Katrina. “I came because I need a security officer.”

“Pavel!” Katrina shouted.

Chekov held up a hand. “I told you many times that if the opportunity presented itself that I would want to go back to space.”

“But he works for Orion! It wouldn’t even be a Federation job!”

Chekov shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It would be space again.” He turned to Kirk. “I assume that you never work in Federation space.”

“Never.”

“Then I only have one condition,” Pavel continued.

“Name it,” Kirk demanded.

Pavel sighed and held out his arm to Katrina as he spoke to Kirk. “Katrina comes with me as my assistant.”

Katrina moved quickly to him and hugged him for a moment. Then she turned, still under his arm and faced Kirk a little defiantly. Kirk smiled. “Done!”

They spoke for another hour working out details and Kirk finally left with a promise to contact Chekov in a couple of weeks. Kirk went back to the hotel and spent the day making plans for the group’s get together when he was ready. After a day of arrangements, he went to bed with the last meeting still ahead of him. The last and the hardest. In many ways. Uhura. He sighed and turned over, but sleep eluded him for a long time.

Chapter Twelve
"The Ties that Bind"

Kirk paced the confines of his new hotel room and pondered again which was the best way to go. Call her first and risk an outright rejection to even speak with him. Or just ambush her and ask for the same wrathful response. But be in her immediate locale so he could continue trying. Both had their advantages. She couldn't throw anything at him over the comm line. But she could terminate the connection and block his calls. In person he could turn on the charm. But she knew that charm and that gave her an edge against it.

He finally stopped in front of the massive dresser and looked into the mirror for some guidance. What he saw made him stop and stand upright and stare. What he saw was the husk of some Ensign of a man, twisting and turning in a bind of indecision. Then he realized what he didn't see. He didn't see a ship's Captain who sometimes had to make dozens of life and death decisions in seconds.

He straightened and wiped the moisture from his upper lip. Ran his fingers through his unruly hair and smiled at the result. He straightened his clothes, snapped up his unusable Orion comm unit and walked out of the suite. There was a certain jauntiness in his step as he trotted down the hotel stairs and took the first transport. Twenty minutes later, he exited the transport, eyed the high-tech gleam of the structure before him and went inside.

Ten minutes later, he rose to speak to the pretty, young blonde that came and told him Uhura had shipped out on the Integral three months ago. When Kirk just stood there, she extended her hand. "I'm Ann Johnson. Her replacement. Have you traveled a long way to see her?"

Kirk smiled and nodded. "About a thousand light years."

"A thousand . . ." She knew that was outside Federation space, no matter which way you went. Then her face lit up. "You must be Jim Kirk!"

Kirk smiled again and turned on the charm a little. He might come out of this with something he could use. “Guilty, as charged.”

Ann smiled and beckoned him to follow, led him to her office and closed and locked the door after he entered. “We can talk a little more freely in here,” she said as she sat behind her desk. “So what brings you to this neck of the woods, so to speak?”

Kirk smiled as he shrugged and made it up as he went. *Keep it simple, Jim.* “I was on planet anyway, seeing some old friends and would feel really bad if I let a chance go by to see her again. To, uh, talk with her. You know.”

Ann nodded. “I know.” She got a knowing look. “She talked about you a lot for a while.”

“She did? Did she . . . Ah, hell. I know I shouldn’t be asking you about her. I just, uh, just . . . miss her so much sometimes.’ Kirk stopped. “You said ‘for a while’. So she stopped? Did she . . . I mean . . . “Kirk stopped and wiped his mouth and chin and shook his head. He stood up. “Look. I’ve taken enough of your time.” He started toward the door. “I’d better go now.”

“Wait a minute,” she said loudly. Kirk stopped, turned and looked at her. “I talk with her once a week to make sure everything’s on track here. She started a number of projects.”

Kirk nodded. “Stuff she needs to keep track of. I understand.”

“Well, I talk to her every week.” She stopped for a moment. “I have all the reports for the week and was going to call tomorrow. But I could call today instead.” She hesitated. “And you could talk to her.”

Kirk looked flustered for a moment and then brightened. “That would be great!” He frowned a moment. “Would I get a chance to talk to her, uh, you know, alone?”

Ann smiled. “I’m sure we could work that out.” She lifted a stack of reports from a tray, put them on her desk and punched a few buttons on her computer. The screen flashed and suddenly she was very professional. “Super-space message. USS Integral.

Commander Uhura. Scrambled and Encrypted." The screen flashed again. "Affirmative. Scrambled and Encrypted. I'll wait."

She smiled at him. "It usually takes a few minutes." The screen flashed again and he heard Uhura's voice for the first time in a year.

"Hey, Ann. You're early. You already transmitted the reports though."

"That's correct. You have a chance to look at them?"

"Yes. Everything looks okay. No surprises with the Bobbsey Twins, eh?"

"No. Since they blew up that lab with you and had to do all the repair they have been attentive, bright and inventive. Just the way you said they'd be."

"Good. Since we're scrambled and Encrypted I'll go ahead and tell you we'll be implementing . . "

"Uhura! Wait a minute!" Uhura frowned but nodded. "Something has come up. I felt that you'd like to handle it yourself."

Uhura sat back and waited. "It's your dime."

Mary Ann fidgeted and then blurted. "I think you can handle it while I go get a cup of water." Ann got up and headed for the door, motioning Kirk to her desk. Uhura stared in wonder as Ann left but waited. Then another figure took Ann's place and sat down into full view.

"Jim!" Uhura smiled

Kirk smiled. "Nyota."

There was silence for a long moment broken finally by the sound of the door to the office closing behind Mary Ann. When she returned after fifteen minutes, knocked on the door, opened it and peeked around, her office was empty, and the computer was off. She sat for a moment and then called the receptionist.

Kirk had left five minutes ago. She checked the log on her computer and found that the call to the Integral had lasted seven minutes, but no recording had been made. That was very strange because all calls were recorded, even scrambled and encoded ones. Very strange indeed. She debated calling Uhura back but thought about it and knew she should just let it go.

A week later, she had to close her mouth as she read a memo stating that Uhura had resigned. Gossip was rampant for a few days, but she just smiled because she knew the reason. Kirk.

Chapter Thirteen
"The Last Piece"

Jim Kirk sat back in his desk chair and breathed a sigh of relief. He had just finished three days of paperwork. But now he could send all his old crew their travel package which should have them at the rendezvous point in two weeks. He sipped at the drink he had fixed for himself earlier but not had time to drink. He briefly wondered if he should order a case of the stuff for the ship when he got back.

The thought made him remember the case of Romulan Ale that Bones had snuck aboard the Enterprise for 'medical' emergencies. And his mind was off, remembering the many adventures they had shared and how often McCoy had saved his bacon in a tight spot. He wished he could bring McCoy with him. But he had heard that McCoy was afflicted with Methusian syndrome. If he left Earth for more than a day or two he would develop a disease like the old-fashioned pneumonia and probably die painfully within the week.

But that didn't mean he couldn't drop by and see his old friend while he was here. With the paperwork all done. He could relax for at least a week and visiting McCoy, even for a few days, would be a fantastic end to his Earth visit. Kirk made a few inquiries of the local system and found out that McCoy was working in a major city just a few hours away. Kirk sent the old crew their packages, made a few arrangements, packed his haversack and headed out the door.

The next morning, Kirk made some inquiries at his hotel and came away with a bottle of Romulan Ale. It had cost him dearly but would be a fantastic surprise for McCoy. He put the bottle, two glasses from his fresher and a tray from an earlier delivery in a small carry-all and went out the door.

Two hours later, Leonard McCoy patted his assistant on the back and commended him for some excellent work. He and his assistant walked back to his office and continued talking as they went inside.

“That was excellent, Sam. I think you’re getting the idea of the progression on that Gildosian study.” McCoy swung the door open and stepped inside and headed for his desk. “Once we get that . . . ” Sam wondered why the Doctor had stopped in mid-sentence. He looked around the office but the only thing he could see that was different was a tray with a bottle of bright blue liquid and two glasses on McCoy’s desk.

“What is it, Doctor?” Sam asked worriedly.

McCoy continued into the office and sat at his desk, never having taken his eyes off the tray and its contents. He leaned forward, sniffed at the bottle’s top, rubbed his nose and sat back with a very serious expression on his face. He looked at Sam and pointed at the bottle. “That, my friend, is a bottle of trouble. That is highly illegal, thoroughly corrosive and completely enjoyable Romulan Ale.’ He sat back and gestured around the office. “And there is only one man I know that would put it there.”

“Alright, Jim. Come on out, you old sea dog!” McCoy said loudly.

Sam started as a man materialized from a corner Sam could have sworn was empty. McCoy met him and they embraced and stood looking at each other for a few moments. Sam started towards the door, but McCoy stopped him. “Where are you going?”

“I assumed that you and your friend . . .”

McCoy interrupted him. “Jim Kirk, this is Sam Richardson. Sam, grab that beaker over there on the counter.” Sam smiled at the man and hurried to the counter, returning with the beaker. McCoy took it, poured a splash of the blue liquid in it, swirled it around and dumped the liquid in the trash. Then he poured two inches in the beaker and each of the glasses and put the bottle down.

McCoy handed Sam a glass, Kirk a glass and picked up the beaker himself. “Here’s to old friends and new ones.” He raised the beaker high, clinked against the glasses and took a gentle sip. Kirk took a sip as well. Sam, not knowing any better, took a healthy swallow. Kirk quickly took the glass from Sam’s hand and McCoy slid a chair under him as he collapsed in a fit of coughing and choking.

Kirk and McCoy sat at the desk and sipped as they waited for Sam to recover. Sam, his throat feeling as if it had been ripped to shreds, his eyes watering heavily and his nose running steadily gradually recovered as he wiped his face clean. He looked over at McCoy and croaked, “My God!” Kirk and McCoy laughed, and McCoy pushed the half-empty glass back to him.

Sam looked at it a moment and then at McCoy. McCoy sipped gently at his own glass and Sam grimaced and picked up the glass. He took the smallest of sips and then another and put the glass down. “I think the first batch destroyed every nerve in my throat!” He croaked, paused and swallowed twice. “Man, that’s good!”

Kirk and McCoy laughed and Sam joined them after a moment. Then came the stories and Sam sat wide-eyed as he discovered just how famous his boss was. “You developed the Venusian Vaccine?”

McCoy waved it off. “Didn’t have much choice. The whole crew was dying around me. I had to do something!” He turned to Kirk to change the subject. “I take it you just stopped by to say hello. What are you up to now?”

Kirk was a little surprised that McCoy hadn’t heard anything and contemplated not saying anything at all but changed his mind. “I got a space job.”

McCoy was surprised and raised both eyebrows. “I hadn’t heard. I did hear that you were going around and looking up the old crew. I assumed it was my turn.”

Kirk hesitated and McCoy could tell. “I was looking up the old crew.” Kirk decided that McCoy was a big boy now and he’d just tell him everything. He took a deep breath because he knew that McCoy would be hurt because he couldn’t go anymore.

“I’m gathering the old crew together, Bones.” Then Kirk was hesitant about saying much about the ship and the Orions. “I needed them for a little job.”

“A job? Aboard a starship?” McCoy started eagerly. Then he stopped and sat back in his chair. “And you’re not inviting me?” McCoy took Kirk’s silence as assent and picked up his beaker roughly, almost spilling some of the contents. “Hell of a thing.” He muttered to himself. And then louder. “Don’t need a

Doctor anymore? Or have you already got that covered with someone younger?!"

Then Kirk started to get a little angry. "I was just trying to spare your feelings, you old curmudgeon! I knew you couldn't go so I hesitated even saying anything about it. I guess I said too much." Kirk rose to go but McCoy stopped him.

"Now wait just a damned minute. What do you mean, I can't go? What's going to stop me! WHO thinks they're going to stop me!" He looked at Kirk belligerently.

"The Methusian Syndrome! That's what'll stop you!" Kirk shook his head. "I may not know much about medicine, but I know you can't go into space with that!" Kirk spit out the last and then felt immediately sorry for his old friend. "I'm sorry, Bones. I didn't want to bring it up at all. When I heard you had it, I thought about not coming by at all. I knew we would talk and I didn't want get you all stoked up for nothing."

McCoy just looked at him a moment. Then he got that look of deviltry that he had when he tormented Spock. He turned to Sam and pointed at him to emphasize his point. "Now watch closely and you are going to see a medical marvel." He held up the beaker, looked at the blue liquid and tipped it up, swallowing the rest in one gulp. He shuddered dramatically, and Kirk knew it wasn't all show. That was potent stuff.

McCoy slammed the empty beaker down almost hard enough to shatter it and gasped once and then again. Then he stood and waved his arms as he shouted, "I'm cured! I'm cured!" Kirk looked at him askance and McCoy looked at Sam and that worthy looked at him like he was crazy. McCoy scowled and looked at Sam. "The medical miracle? The Methusian Syndrome?" He explained like he was talking to a slow child. "I'm cured?"

Sam's face lit up and he glanced at Kirk and then nodded enthusiastically. "That's amazing, Doctor McCoy. You really are cured!"

Kirk frowned and looked at McCoy. "I take it that little act was for my benefit?"

McCoy nodded and stood up. "When do we leave?"

Kirk shook his head. “That Romulan Ale is good stuff, but I don’t think it would cure the Methusian stuff. That stuff will kill you, Bones!”

“Jim.” McCoy looked at Kirk. “I don’t have Methusian Syndrome.”

“So the Romulan . . .”

But McCoy cut him off. “I never had it, Jim.” McCoy looked at him quizzically. “Who told you I had it?”

“You never had it! That’s great! I do need a Doctor. Especially for our old crew. But I do have Orions on the ship as well.”

McCoy nodded and continued quietly. “I’m in Jim. Now who told you about my affliction?”

Kirk sighed. He knew McCoy wouldn’t let it go until he found out. Thing was he knew McCoy wouldn’t let it go especially after he found out. “We were sharing a few drinks one night and . . . Scotty just mentioned . . .”

“Scotty!” Then McCoy stopped and sat back. “I can see why you believed him.” McCoy shook his head. “I saw him about six months ago and we were talking while drinking and he had asked me what I was doing, and I mentioned that the work we were doing would benefit the Methusian Syndrome. I was kind of serious because that stuff is serious. He must have figured I had it.”

McCoy looked Kirk straight in the eye. “There is no known cure for it. And I don’t have it.”

Kirk nodded. “I’ll have to make arrangements. How soon can you get away?”

“Since Sam will be taking over, how about right now?”

Sam looked shocked. “But we have so much going on right now!”

McCoy patted him on the arm. “You are more than capable of handling anything we’ve got on our plate right now. Just remember to study our people and delegate. We have a lot of untapped talent. Remember the report I had you compile about our people?” Sam nodded. “That should guide you. And if you don’t feel comfortable about a project, don’t take it on!”

“But the money!” Sam complained.

“The grants are clear. The subsidies we got will be satisfied with the Minocan Project completion. Everything’s on track for that and it should be completed next week.” McCoy went to the desk and pulled out a folder. “Here’s the books. There’s over a hundred and twenty thousand credits available and you should be getting another ten thousand from the completion of the Minocan Project.”

“Just the steady work from the overflow at the University is enough to keep you going. And that won’t be going away. Doubling in the next year.” McCoy patted his arm again. “I’ll be around for about a week,” McCoy said and Kirk nodded. You have my comm code so just call me if you need me.”

McCoy took Kirk by the arm and pushed him at the door. He turned back and commented to Sam. “Meeting at ten in the morning. I’ll tell the people you are the man. If anyone wants to leave, let them. You can lose three and still get the work done.”

The door closed and Sam fought an incipient panic attack for a few minutes. Then he thought about it. McCoy had always had him handle the actual projects. So he knew what was going on, what they could handle and who could handle it. He smiled as he realized that McCoy had been grooming him all along. This was going to be great!

Chapter Fourteen
"The Coalition"

Everything went smoothly until they met at the shuttle for the trip up to the start ship they would travel out on. While they were waiting for the shuttle the Orion ambassador had come in. Kirk was talking to the shuttle pilot at the time and didn't see him. The Ambassador immediately started throwing his weight around, putting the humans that were working for him in their place. Kirk walked in as Sulu was very close to leveling the man.

"What's going on here!" Kirk demanded.

The Ambassador looked over at him and smiled evilly. "I was just beginning to indoctrinate your new people, Kirk."

Kirk smiled himself. "Not necessary, Ambassador."

The Ambassador's smile slipped. "I will determine what is necessary, Kirk!"

Kirk's smile grew broader. "No, you won't. These people work for me. Not you."

A dark cloud slipped across the Ambassador's face. "They work for the Empire, Kirk! And therefore, for me!"

"I'll say it once more. They work for me. I work for the Council. You are an insignificant little Orion that couldn't get a real job, so they shipped you out here. Leave my people alone or I'll have a few words with Granth. I'm sure he would be very interested in your ideas and methods with the new crew that is going to turn your Empire around. I think you're done here. Ambassador." The last was said with great emphasis and the Ambassador got the message, turned in a huff and left. Kirk knew he wouldn't be back.

When the door had closed, Kirk turned to his crew. "This is a weird situation. But I'm pretty sure I have set the stage so they all know that you work for me. In any case, if that toad shows back up, ignore him and let me know. If worse comes to worse, we'll let Scotty take care of him." He purposely named the only member of their group that didn't fight as much. But still could.

“Is that a dig now Jim?” Scotty said softly. The rest of them laughed at Scott’s sudden bravado and Scotty soon joined them, flexing an arm as if making a muscle.

Kirk herded them into the shuttle and they headed up.

Two weeks later they crossed into Orion space and Kirk gathered them together officially. “We’ll be at the home world in three days. We will be on the ship in four. I know that the council will want to meet you all, so I’m going to suggest a little party instead of some formal affair where we all walk on pins and needles waiting for the world to blow up. The Orions like a good party as much as we do, so I’m sure they’ll go along.

“The rest applies aboard ship. They are a belligerent lot so I’m sure there will be a few challenges, especially since you will be taking the department head’s place. Rarely does it cross genders. But there’s always a first time. If you get in a scuffle, just remember one thing. If you get them down, break one of their bones. They may still get up if they’re mad enough. But a broken bone is usually a sign that the fight is over. Saves a lot of difficulties. Any questions?”

“Break a bone? That seems kind of drastic, Jim,” McCoy commented. Can’t we just put them to sleep or something?”

“No. The broken bone will get them a couple of garbage details from their boss, but they will respect you. They’ll be back on duty in a few days. They heal really rapidly.”

“They do? I’ll have to look into that then.” McCoy went back to reading and the meeting broke up.

The party went well. The new crew dressed in their finest dress which was alright since they were dealing with the cream of the Orions. “I think you can kiss those outfits good-bye once we get on the ship,” was Kirk’s only comment. His first officer came as commanded. He had come early to meet the new people and commented that he wouldn’t be here if Kirk hadn’t commanded it. He made friends of all the new crew with that statement since they were all workers, not strutters. They all agreed with him and that stopped a few fights since the challenges were almost inevitable and he stood head and shoulders above all the Orions there and he was on their side.

At one particular confrontation Kirk came up by Tarl and asked him what was going on. “That Gordilian worm is trying to get Sulu into a fight. He shouldn’t even be here. His father is a member of the council and sick and he is taking his place. He feels he should be obnoxious since your crew are earthlings.”

“Will it ruin our relationship to the other council members?” Kirk asked quietly so no one else would hear.

“The rest would cheer. The council member is on his way out and they know his son is just a thug in disguise right now.” Tarl rumbled.

Kirk nodded, caught Sulu’s attention, pointed at the troublemaker and then at Tarl. Tarl looked at Sulu and smiled, a fearsome thing in itself. He pointed at the troublemaker, nodded eagerly and pointed to his own leg just above the knee. Sulu frowned a moment and made the breaking motion and Tarl nodded again. Sulu smiled.

The next time the troublemaker came around he had an audience because he made so much noise. The council members looked at Tarl to watch him run the troublemaker off as he had done before. Tarl made a great show of looking at the Orion, shaking his head and then looking at Sulu and nodding.

The council members understood at once that Tarl was preventing the fracas as a sign of respect for them. They looked back at Sulu and moved closer. Sulu gauged the Orion carefully and it was over before it started. Sulu laughed at him and when he charged, threw him, making sure he landed on his head. The Orion lifted himself and roared just as Sulu delivered a double strike to the Orion’s unprotected neck. The blow was hard enough to kill an ordinary animal, but the Orion grunted and raised his head and Sulu delivered once again. The Orion groaned and fell face down, unconscious.

Sulu prodded him twice then lifted his head by the hair and dropped it. He walked around the unconscious man twice, looking him over and shaking his head. Finally he stopped and put a foot on the man’s leg above the knee. He casually looked around at the crowd and when they signaled complete approval, Sulu came off the ground and broke the leg with a single blow. The snap could be heard throughout the party. The Orions

howled their approval and led Sulu off for a drink. Two of the servers hauled the offending body out.

Tarl moved closer to Kirk and rumbled, “Well done! Are they all as accomplished?”

Kirk shook his head. “No.” He pointed at McCoy who was having a great time. “He’s a Doctor. He might give you something to knock you out. But he’d never be able to break a bone.”

Tarl shook his head as well. “It is lucky he is such a likeable sort. I would hate to see him hurt.”

The next morning Kirk assembled them in the sickbay of the ship and had McCoy give anti-drunk shots to those who needed them. It wouldn’t do to have the new department heads incapacitated on their first day at work. The second day they had an assembly and Kirk introduced the crews to each other. The old crew had heard about Sulu’s prowess and gave him many pats on the back and a lot of respect. The rest got respect because Tarl made sure they understood that he stood for them.

They pulled out for patrol duty and there were a few grumblings about the impossible demands the new department heads had set. The training was twice what they had been accustomed to and they wondered if they could even do it. The fourth day out they encountered the Klingons on a search and destroy mission in their space.

There were two Klingon ships and due to his current navigator trainee’s error, they were right between them and under their flashing phasers. Kirk had been conferring with Tarl at the science station and headed back to the command chair just as Sulu replaced his trainee.

"Sulu, Status!" Kirk barked as he swung into his command chair.

Sulu spoke even as his hands continued to fly across his navigation panel. His eyes flicked from reading to reading as he strove to keep the stronger forward shields toward the Klingon cruisers that circled them.

"Shields eight and twelve down to twenty percent. Recommend Rheingold’s . . ."

"Do it!" Kirk's head turned fractionally toward Chekov, his eyes never leaving the front view screen. "Get a lock on the ship to our right, Chekov. Photon torpedoes only!"

The image on the front view screen tilted crazily as Sulu implemented the maneuver normally reserved for victory celebrations and definitely not used at .5 sublight! The ship twisted in space, tumbling end for end with a slight tilt to the left. Kirk held tightly to the command chair. The Klingons both decelerated rapidly as the enemy ship apparently went out of control.

"Full phasers on completion, Sulu. Chekov, three times on my command!" The ship slowed its tumble under Sulu's frantic ministrations, one Klingon warship swinging into view directly ahead. Even as Sulu's hand streaked for the phaser control Kirk cried, "Fire, Chekov!"

Twin scintillating beams of radiant energy pierced the black of space and speared the warship in its weakened shielding. The slender neck leading to the command area flared brightly and then disintegrated as the metal gave and explosive decompression forced the command pod from the rest of the ship.

At almost the same instant, the silent ejection of the first photon torpedo could be felt and the ball of tremendous energies sped toward the other Klingon ship. This commander had a few extra seconds to react and his ship had begun to turn when the first torpedo struck. Already weakened shields flared and the ship shuddered. The second torpedo struck before the shields could recover fully. The shield energy disappeared suddenly from the port side. But before the ship could complete its turn to bring the stronger starboard shields toward the ship, the last torpedo struck, and the Klingon ship disappeared in a huge flash as matter and antimatter combined in an uncontrolled reaction.

Kirk glanced briefly toward the engineering station. "Lt. Sleng, tractors on the command pod! Uhura, jam subspace!"

"Subspace communications jammed, sir"

The Orion fumbled for a moment but answered, "Tractor beam engaged, sir"

"Captain . . .?"

Kirk's glance shifted to Tarl fractionally and then back to the view screen. "Sulu, precision phaser fire under science station direction." Tarl's hands quickly punched buttons and flipped a switch. Sulu pressed a button.

"Locked on, sir."

"Fire!"

Once again the phaser beam lanced across empty space. This time impinging on the engineering section of the severed ship. A small area discolored and the beam stopped.

"Weapons systems deactivated on the Klingon ship, Captain."

"Thank you, Tarl. Uhura, drop subspace jamming and open a channel to the command pod. Sulu, make our distance one million kilometers."

The view shifted slightly as the ship moved slowly back. Kirk settled more easily in his seat.

"Response to our query, Captain." Uhura touched the Feinberg device in her ear briefly. "A quite colorful response actually."

Kirk smiled. He realized the enemy commander's difficulty. His ship, the only means of fighting his enemy, had been disabled. He was powerless to do more than sit and wait. And Klingons don't like being in someone else's power. Especially . . . "On the main view screen, Uhura."

The screen dissolved to show the interior of the cramped Klingon battle bridge. "KIRK!!!!" It took Kirk a moment to realize that the Klingon's extra dark color was due to his being almost apoplectic. His hands were clutching uncontrollably before him as he glared at his hated enemy. Kirk moved back slightly and signaled to Uhura to cut the transmission.

As the screen slipped back to the view of the two sections of ship hanging in space, Kirk punched a button on his chair arm. "Scotty."

There was a moment of voices in the background. "Scott here, Captain." Kirk hesitated at the sound of the heavy brogue. Scotty's brogue usually came through only when the situation was bad.

"Report!"

"The mains are off line. Impulse power only."

"How long, Scotty?"

"We'll have to have the facilities of a Starbase, Captain."

Kirk blanched visibly. "Scotty . . ."

"We'll do the best we can, sir. Scott out."

Kirk nodded to himself. Stuck this close to Klingon space with barely enough power to move considering the immense distances involved. He looked to the science station. Tarl looked up at him without a word being spoken.

"Approximately 122.7 hours at full impulse to Substation twelve."

Kirk's expression hardened. "Chekov, course 111 mark 6. Sulu. Best possible speed." His voice cut across the acknowledgments. "Uhura, department heads meeting in one hour."

An hour later, Kirk sat back in his chair in the main briefing room. All of the senior officers were already present and speaking quietly among themselves and the trainees they had brought. The door finally opened and chief engineer Scott came in with two of his men. Kirk began before they were even seated.

"Gentlemen, we are sitting on the edge of Klingon space and limping home like an antiquated merchant ship." Scott winced. "We have impulse power only and estimate 122 hours to the nearest sub base." Kirk turned to Mr. Scott. "Scotty, what's our status? What's wrong that we can't repair and regain warp drive?"

Scott wiped a hand quickly over his face before looking directly at Kirk. "Captain, we're running the impulse engines on battery power. The problem is nae the matter-antimatter sequence but the dilithium intermix environment."

"But we've repaired this type of problem before, Scotty."

Scott shook his head tiredly. "We've replaced or repaired the control circuits. But our problem is in the intermix chamber itself. The chamber has developed a crack. Its nae even visible to the naked eye. But the intermix chamber is constructed to exacting specifications and triple checked by sophisticated equipment before preliminary testing. Micro welding the interior of

the crack would do no good since the slightest physical aberration in the inside contours would cause harmonious feedback. And that ..."

"The Wilson incident."

Scott nodded grimly. At the questioning looks of the trainees, Kirk completed. "The Wilson was a Star Fleet ship engaged in battle by an outpost on the border of the Romulan neutral zone. During the battle their warp drive shut down when they discovered a crack similar to ours. Commodore Simpson, who was aboard for a diplomatic mission, insisted that repairs be made.

“He had concluded treaty negotiations with one of the unaligned worlds in the region and felt that for the Ambassador's ship to be captured by Romulans would indicate a lack of ability on the Federation's part to protect its own ships much less an aligned world. He invoked Starfleet General Order 26 and the Captain was forced to comply.

“The Wilson was annihilated within seconds. The diplomatic mission was considered a success since the Wilson's explosion destroyed the three war birds that had her ringed."

Some heads were turned away, all shaking them. Kirk snapped back to the present and took in the gathering. "We may have lost our warp capability, but we will have every other system that can be repaired in top operating condition. We can expect a visit from our Klingon friends as soon as their cruisers can get here. Lt. Uhura confirmed that a message was sent by the senior Klingon ship when we engaged them. We will have our maximum readiness. Comments?" When no one spoke, Kirk continued, "Dismissed."

As the briefing room emptied, Kirk glanced over to a corner where Scotty and Lt. Skang were engaged in animated, but silent, discussion. He turned back as Tarl and McCoy stopped at the end of the table.

"We exceeded the sensor range of the remaining Klingon ship approximately 22.6 minutes ago." Tarl commented.

Kirk nodded and snapped a switch on the panel in front of him. "Bridge, Lt. Watchell."

"Kirk here. Change course to 178 mark 8, maximum possible speed. Kirk out"

"Bridge, aye."

Kirk leaned back in his chair and looked up at McCoy as he started to speak.

"Changed your mind about going to the Starbase, Jim?"

He shifted slightly as Tarl answered for him.

"No, Doctor. The captain has merely completed the second step in an act of deception which may gain the ship some extra time"

McCoy started to speak and then shook his head and turned back to Kirk. "We are NOW headed to the Starbase." He shifted an irritated glance at Tarl. "But will it be enough?"

Kirk turned slightly, "Tarl?"

"Estimate Klingon reinforcements will rendezvous at the battle site in no less than one hour. After crew consolidation and old ship destruction, pursuit will be at warp 7 or more. At the time the Klingon ship approaches our course change, we will be out of the range of their long-range sensors on our new course."

McCoy leaned forward slightly, "So we'll make it?"

"However, the Klingons are aware of the location of our Sub bases. It would only be logical to assume that after traversing a distance sufficient to overtake our ship on the original heading and speed, they will decide to make an equally quick move toward the sub base."

"Then they'll catch us?"

"Not if they head directly toward the sub base."

When it was evident that Tarl was finished, McCoy threw up his hands and turned to Kirk. "Well why not? They should be able to catch us in no time at all."

"Actually, closer to 3.2 hours, Doctor."

McCoy looked to Tarl and deliberately turned his back on the Orion. He leaned slightly over the table toward Kirk and silently mouthed, "WHY?"

Kirk had to smile. "Because we aren't headed to the sub base at all. At least not directly." His hand described a long, slow parabolic course.

"But will it work?"

"A 43.7% chance of success, Doctor. All other scenarios present a maximum of 22.2% success."

McCoy shook his head and muttered loud enough for Tarl to hear, “Damned Orion is as bad as the Vulcan was!”

All three men turned as the voices from the corner of the briefing room became louder. "Nae, lad. I can see that ye have a good grasp of the tolerances involved, but the danger to the ship. . ."

"At least we can try! You'll be checking the final tolerances yourself!"

"Aye, lad, but ..."

Kirk rapped sharply on the table and when Scott swung to face him raised a querulous eyebrow. Scott came over to the table with Lt. Skang and his other man, Lt. Skrill in tow. He stopped before Kirk and glanced quickly at the lieutenants and back to Kirk and nodded once sharply to himself.

"Lt. Skang was explaining to me how we could construct the intermix chamber cover ..." Scott broke off as Kirk began shaking his head. "Captain. The idea definitely has some merit."

Kirk looked sharply at Scott. "Explain."

"Lt. Skang came to us from the fabrication facility at Sub Base Eight, so he has an excellent background in fabrication techniques. And his attention to detail and tolerances is evident from the ship’s replica in the Rec. room."

Kirk looked up at Skang. "That is outstanding work"

"Fascinating, Captain. And it does display the attention to detail necessary. I would only question the techniques in the fabrication of the intermix chamber cover. That is considerably larger." Tarl inputted.

Lt. Skang started to speak and stopped and stood still. Scott glanced at him and nodded to the captain. "Speak up, lad. He can't make a decision in a vacuum."

Lt. Skang leaned forward eagerly. "Skrill, er . . Lt. Skrill and I worked together on the replica. We used a pulsed laser with a measuring pulse on multiples of three . . ." He glanced up to see Tarl shaking his head. ". . .which won't work here."

Kirk catching the interplay, turned to Tarl. "The lieutenant obviously used a ruby laser which will function in pulsed array. The actinium lasers we utilize on the ship are steady state only."

Kirk swung back to Lt. Skrill, "But you think you have the answer to that?"

"Yes, sir. Lt. Skang worked with a variety of possibilities when we started the replica project. One of them used actinium lasers and dilithium channeled force fields."

He hesitated again as Tarl nodded. "The dilithium force fields have gained wide acceptance in the last year for extremely close tolerances. However, the degree of precision is in direct proportion to the input control program. Since I have examined the control programs, I can state that they do not have the tolerances required for this application."

Kirk started to shake his head and noticed that Lt. Skang was urging Lt. Skrill to speak up. "Yes, lieutenant?"

He flushed deeply but moved forward. He spoke to Tarl, "I've been working on the algorithm they used as the basis for that control program, sir. I've instituted a control for the control." He reached to the computer tie-in and quickly punched up his new program. Tarl bent to the viewer immediately and began making his own requests of the computer. After a few moments, he tapped a single switch clearing the display and stood with his hands behind his back.

Kirk waited for a moment but then prompted, "Tarl?"

"Fascinating, Captain. Perfectly logical once perceived. The perception will provide Lt. Skrill with an excellent paper for submission to the Orion Science Council."

McCoy spluttered a moment and then blurted out, "But will it work, Tarl!!"

Tarl turned to the captain. "This modification raises the percentage of success to 98.77 if the power requirements can be met for the sustained period."

"Scotty?"

Lt. Skang had pulled back up the modified program and shifted the display to the power requirements section. Scotty looked it over carefully and made a few inputs of his own. He stood and nodded. "Aye. I can do that. But not with the shields

up. The shield circuits will inject enough feedback to make the program worthless."

Kirk looked from man to man and then hit the intercom switch. "Bridge. This is the captain. Lower the shields and drop weapons status to standby."

"Bridge, aye, captain."

Kirk swung back to the engineering group. "Well, gentlemen? Make me an intermix chamber cover. But time is very limited"

"Approximately 7.4 hours if the Klingons use their standard search techniques after the two course changes." Tarl threw in.

Scott nodded and headed for the door with the two lieutenants trailing him in deep conversation.

Two hours later, Kirk signed the fuel consumption report and sat back in the command chair. Uhura turned to the captain. "Sir, Mr. Scott is requesting to drop speed to .75 impulse."

Kirk nodded and pressed the button on his chair arm. "What's the problem, Scotty?"

"We've had to divert considerable power to the construction effort, captain. And we are running on batteries, sir."

"Understood, Mr. Scott. Mr. Sulu. Make speed .75 impulse."

Sulu nodded and pressed buttons. "Three quarter impulse. Aye, sir."

Kirk swung toward Uhura, "Where is Tarl now?"

She checked her board and replied, "In Science Lab Two, sir."

Kirk nodded and rose from the command chair, heading for the turbolift doors. "Mr. Sulu. You have the bridge. I will be in Science Lab Two."

He barely heard their crisp replies as he moved into the turbolift deep in thought.

As he entered the science lab, Kirk noticed that Tarl was keying in data into the computer at breakneck speed. He stopped to one side and waited for Tarl to finish. Tarl glanced up at him and then back to his board and stopped. "Yes, Captain."

"I didn't want to interrupt you, Tarl"

"I will complete in a moment Sir."

Kirk shook his head. "Alright. I just wanted to check on the project's progress."

"Lt. Skrill is in Science Lab One, checking my inputs and testing the program modifications as I am entering them. We will have completed this phase in twenty-three minutes. Complete testing of the control program will require an additional eighteen minutes. Lt. Skang has completed the equipment setup and the target bench in the hanger bay. He is presently testing the three pieces of casing materials from stores to ensure the material has no hidden flaws. He should be ready to commence in thirty-eight minutes."

Tarl paused briefly at Kirk, "Naturally, all these figures are estimates based on our present rate of completion and the expectation of zero defects."

Kirk smiled. "And the revised program? Will you submit that to the Orion Science Council when we get back to the Starbase?"

"After the acid test of actually making the intermix chamber cover, I will submit the new program to the Council, in Lt. Skrill's name, by tachyon squirt prior to our arrival at the Sub Base if the Klingons manage to locate us. The revised program is of too great a value to allow its loss through battle damage."

Kirk raised an eyebrow at that but remained silent. After a moment he nodded to himself and headed for the door. "I'll be in the hanger deck, Tarl."

Tarl nodded and shifted one hand to a separate panel to punch in the captain's new destination for Lt. Uhura.

The hanger deck was a scene of controlled but obviously hurried activity. Kirk paused and then climbed to the observation and control station. He watched as Scotty supervised the crossover of power modules and nodded when Scott noticed him.

"Why the hanger deck, Mr. Scott?"

"Lt. Skrill’s suggestion, sir. And a good one. The area is large enough for the setup space we require, the power modifications can easily be made here, and the toxic fumes generated in the actual fabrication can more readily be vented outside the ship in this location."

"I'm impressed."

"Yes, sir. Both of these men have shown a great deal of resourcefulness and ingenuity. I'll be submitting commendations for them to you after we reach the Sub Base."

Kirk frowned in thought for a moment remembering Tarl's comment on the value of the work itself. Kirk valued the results of human endeavor too, but also recognized the need for human recognition. "Make that before our possible 'rendezvous' with the Klingons. I'll want that in the log we drop before the engagement."

Scott nodded, "Yes, sir. I agree with you totally. I'll make the time. The space conversion and material testing will be completed in about an hour. The actual fabrication can be started then if Lt. Skang and Tarl have their program completed."

"They'll be ready, Scotty. How long for the actual fabrication?"

"That'll only take twenty minutes. But before we even move it off the rack, I'll be running my tests on it. That will take another hour at least. It must match the specifications exactly!"

Kirk nodded. "I don't want there to be another “Wilson incident" either, Scotty." He headed for the door, "I'll be in my cabin, Scotty." Scott nodded and headed back to his men as Kirk left the area.

Kirk looked up from the screen when the door chime sounded. "Come." The door slid open and Doctor McCoy entered. Noting the potables in the Doctor's hand, he shut off the computer display and leaned back in his chair.

"I'm glad to see that you're so agreeable, Jim. I had anticipated a brief struggle."

Kirk shook his head. "No fight, Doctor. Since you entered I've done a few calculations. Fabrication, testing, possible arrival of the Klingons ...." Kirk nodded to himself. "Yes. I could easily metabolize the two ounces of that highly corrosive blue liquid you intend to prescribe before I am needed again."

McCoy had paused in the midst of this recitation. Now he sat at the table with Kirk. "You're spending too much time around Tarl, Captain." Kirk laughed. "Besides how did you know I was going to prescribe TWO ounces."

Kirk immediately stood, clasped his hands behind his back and stared off into space.

"Given our previous imbibing episodes, the fact that you are my physician and prescribe my hangover medicine, and that you didn't bring glasses and know that my own glasses will hold only two ounces, I surmise that the indicated dosage will be TWO ounces." Kirk glanced down and smiled.

McCoy finished pouring Kirk's glass full and sat the bottle on the table. "You better sit down and consume some of this before I haul you off to sickbay for my new de-Orionizing treatment." They both laughed as Kirk sat again and very carefully raised the glass and lowered the level half an inch. He carefully tasted the liquor and then noisily swallowed and squinted and opened his mouth for a quick breath. He gazed at the blue liquid with a cocked eyebrow and gently placed the glass back on the table.

"I'm glad you only have Romulan ale on the ship as a 'medical aid', Bones. Drinking this regularly would eat your throat out."

"Nonsense, Jim. After the first drink you can't feel your throat anyway."

"I'm talking about the next morning!"

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

Kirk opened his eyes and quickly rolled off the bed and hit the intercom switch. "Kirk here." His mind noted that he felt much better for his short rest.

"The fabrication and testing are complete, Captain."

"Meeting in the main briefing room in fifteen minutes, Tarl."

"Yes, sir. I will inform the interested parties."

Kirk stretched and quickly peeled off his shirt as he moved into the head. He turned on the shower and finished stripping down. A quick shower and a fresh set of clothes and he'd be ready to go.

When Kirk entered the briefing room, all his senior officers were already present. Talk ceased as he approached the table. He looked carefully at the piece of tooled metal with its protective

covering that lay close to his seat. He paused and looked around at his officers. "Tarl?"

"The revised program worked with no adjustments required. Specified tolerance was .00001 inch. The program performed easily within that tolerance."

"Mr. Scott?"

"Nae, sir. I recalibrated me instruments twice. The last scan was made at .000001 inch. That metal meets the specifications to six decimal places. And that's one decimal place more than the fabrication facility uses. No one could do better!"

Kirk considered a moment and then looked up at his chief engineer. "Mr. Scott. Install the cover."

"Aye, sir."

But as Scott rose to go, Kirk noticed Lt. Skang's face was very pale. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

"Sir. Over three hundred lives are depending on MY work ...."

Kirk nodded. "Two things, Mr. Skang. Mr. Scott is my chief engineer and the best engineer in the fleet. I have the utmost confidence in him and, through him, in you. If he says its right, I am prepared to stake the lives of every crew member on his judgment."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Then Kirk smiled. "Dismissed." Scott fairly strutted from the room with the cover under his arm and with both lieutenants in his wake. Kirk turned back to the table in time to see McCoy urging Tarl to speak. "A question, Tarl?"

Tarl glanced quickly at McCoy and framed his reply. "I speak only at the Doctor's need for complete data."

Kirk looked quickly at the closed briefing room door. "If there's some problem, Tarl ..."

"No, sir. I had just wondered what the second thing you were going to mention to Lt. Skang might have been."

Kirk saw Tarl look over at McCoy and his face grew cold. He glanced at McCoy himself and noted that the Doctor had turned away from the table and had forcibly covered his mouth with his hand to keep from laughing. He turned back to Tarl and

deadpanned, "If it didn't work, Mr. Tarl, I'd make sure that Lieutenant Skang didn't get shore leave for a year!"

Tarl's eyes closed briefly at this and the explosive guffaw from McCoy. He shook his head briefly and rose and left the room, leaving Kirk and McCoy helplessly laughing at the table. He nodded to himself shortly and stored this bit of knowledge with his other experiences of human humor and its therapeutic value.

Kirk entered the bridge and immediately went to the science station. "Tarl?"

Tarl looked up from his hooded viewer briefly. "My pleasure, Captain."

Kirk smiled and held the serious eyes before him a moment. "Thank you, Mr. Tarl." He turned back to the command chair. "Status, Mr. Sulu?"

"Estimate arrival at Starbase in two hours, six minutes at present course and speed."

Kirk sat and punched a button on his chair arm. "Mr. Scott?" There was muffled silence at the other end and then came Scott's voice. "We'll have the cover installation complete in five minutes, Captain."

"Take your time, Mr. Scott. Kirk out." He punched the button again and turned to the science station. "How long before we are in sensor range of the Sub Base, Mr. Tarl?"

"Estimate 43.6 minutes," Tarl answered with his head still down in his viewer. Then he sat straight and looked at Kirk. "I recommend we do NOT contact the Sub Base. There seems to be something at the edge of our sensor range and heading this way."

Kirk swung to Sulu. "On screen!" He examined the star-studded view carefully. "Magnification factor, twelve." The view shifted slightly and he watched closely as first one and then another Klingon cruiser took on definition. He counted four before he felt for and punched the button for engineering. "Scotty. Are you done?"

An agonizing moment dragged by and finally Mr. Scott answered. "About five minutes now, sir."

"But you said that five minutes ago!"

"Yes, sir. But you said to take our time so I just finished one more test."

"We may not have five minutes, Mr. Scott!"

"Then I'll try to do it in four. Scott out."

Kirk numbly nodded and punched the button again. "Sulu. Change course to 103 mark 7. Best possible speed!"

"Aye, sir." Sulu quickly changed the course and speed and the view on the screen changed slightly. "Heading directly away from the Klingon's now, Captain."

Kirk turned as McCoy moved down beside him. "I don't understand, Jim."

"By heading directly away from him, Bones, we appear as just another speck in space without any apparent motion of our own. He may change course in a few minutes if he misses us."

Tarl slowly stood and shook his head. "The Klingon vessel has just increased speed to warp six. Estimate positive detection in 1.76 minutes. He should overhaul us in four minutes, Captain."

Kirk already had the line open to Engineering. "Mr. Scott?"

"Cover's in place, Captain! It will take one minute to evacuate the intermix chamber and four minutes to set the formula and check it."

"Klingon has increased speed to warp eight. Overhaul in two minutes. The other Klingons are following," Tarl's voice broke in.

"Scotty. Get everything set up and ready but DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT bring the mains on-line."

"Aye, Captain. I'll let you know."

Kirk left the link open. "Sulu. All stop!"

"All stop, aye, sir!"

Kirk watched in horror as one by one the Klingon vessels came out of warp and slipped into position around him. Finally the ship was ringed by all six vessels so closely there was no chance for escape.

"Scotty?"

"Ready, sir. Just now."

"Stand by, Mr. Scott."

"Sulu. Emergency break away on my mark."

"Captain. We are being hailed."

"Wait, Uhura! Remember the comedy show that you and Mr. Sulu and Mr. Chekov performed in?" At her nod and look of enlightenment, he continued, "On screen, Uhura"

The front view screen washed to a view of a Klingon bridge. The face of the same Klingon commander they had stranded in his command section of his destroyed ship smiled at him. "KIRK!" He visually controlled himself. Uhura's voice could be heard counting down from thirty in the background.

"Captain Kling of this fine ship has been gracious enough to allow me to have the honor of giving the command for your destruction. I just wanted to see ..." Suddenly he was pushed aside, and another Klingon face filled the screen. "AMPLIFY!", he spoke to the side. They could all hear Uhura's countdown being beamed back to them across the void. "Fifteen - fourteen - thirteen ..."

The screen suddenly went back to the star field as contact was broken. "Klingon cruisers moving ...."

"Scotty. Bring the mains on-line."

Kirk watched the tell tails on Sulu's board. The green lights lit. "ENGAGE!!!"

The ship shuddered but instantaneously leaped between two of the Klingon ships. Phaser fire filled the space where she had been just instants before. At warp eight they were within sensor range of the Sub Base in moments. The Klingons reluctantly broke off their attack and sped for the Neutral Zone.

The next day, Kirk was about to dismiss his senior officers when a message came in from Sub Base control. "This is Captain Kirk."

"Captain, we just had a very strange incident, sir. A Klingon shuttle craft was approaching the station at high speed heading for the hanger doors. We managed to make contact before he crashed into the door's force field."

"And ..?" "He seemed to be screaming your name, sir."

Kirk just shook his head. "Kirk out." He looked around the table again. "Thank you, gentlemen. And Mr. Scott?"

"Aye, sir?"

"Make sure that Lt. Skang goes on shore leave while we are at the Sub Base."

Scott nodded, "Aye, sir," and signed off leaving McCoy laughing and Tarl rumbling to himself in what passed for humor.

Chapter Fifteen
"Rebellion & Retaliation"

The next few months saw them engaged in activity, but nothing like the first skirmish. To their credit, after that skirmish the Orion trainees had shown a great deal of respect for their new bosses. And all had buckled down and were making real progress.

The inspectors from the council noticed too. And made a few demands. Kirk ended up going back to the home world and meeting with the council again. And again. On the last meeting he had caved.

"Members of the Council. I will bow to your wishes." There was much murmuring. Kirk hadn't given an inch so far. "With conditions." Now there were nods and laughs. This was more like the Kirk they had come to know. Most of the members leaned forward. There was no replacement for battle. But arguing with this hard-headed human came close to blows at times. And the rush of blood in their aged systems was like going into battle sometimes. Especially when you knew you had the upper hand any way.

"You are vaunted warriors all. You have been in battle against the enemy and survived. You have used your strength and intelligence to climb from warrior status to leader status. And the Empire applauds your tenacity in your quest and the service you do for the Empire in the position you hold now. For you have gained wisdom and are using it to strengthen your Empire beyond its dreams."

Kirk stopped here because it was impossible to continue with all the shouts and laughter of the exuberant Council members. They were getting high praise indeed and from a member of another race who recognized their achievements. Tarl, who had accompanied Kirk as his protocol advisor, leaned close to Kirk and lowered his voice so the members couldn't hear him.

"I'm not sure exactly what your agenda is, but much more of that and they will want to keep you here," Tarl rumbled deep in

his chest. “We have a saying that now would be a good time to lead in the other targus.”

Kirk thought rapidly. He knew what Tarl was saying. Now was the time to drop the other shoe. And praise was a delicate thing. Yes. “Honored members of the council,” he almost shouted. The group did calm down. A little. Kirk still spoke loudly and continued.

“The men you have placed on my ship have learned. They too are warriors. They too are meeting something they never had before. A challenge to them as warriors, yes.” There was a loud surge of agreement. “But they have been challenged with knowledge as well. And as leaders they are progressing.”

“The standard we operate on has challenged them to grow. And they have!” Another shout of approval. “They have strived and fought and are within inches of victory! Mere inches!” Here Kirk paused and as he had anticipated, the council members realized he was saying the crew hadn’t quite made it yet.

“You are asking these men to take their knowledge and go out in the fleet and teach others. A notable progression for any warrior.” Kirk waited for a lull. “And they are almost ready.” They grew even more quiet.

“All of you were leaders before you came here to the council. And you know as leaders yourself that one of the most important things a leader must learn is how to encourage his men. How to make them want to not only succeed as a warrior but learn from their mistakes in their own attempts at leadership. For you know too well, I’m sure, how fatal it is to put a man in a position of leadership, and depend on him when he isn’t ready.”

“How many chances have been lost? How many battles have gone to defeat! How many times have we pushed a man before he had that final surge that made him a true leader?”

Kirk gave them a minute to pat themselves on the back for making the jump to leader. Most of them were sure that they were the exception that had made it on his own. When they had quieted, he continued.

“These warriors you have given me have almost proven themselves to be more than a warrior. More than a person who

knows their job to perfection. More than a person who is ready to follow in to almost certain death. These men are ready to become leaders in their own right. Ready to become the men who will challenge others to grow and learn. Ready to become leaders, as you are. Leaders who can take their own crew and make them better warriors and glean out the ones who will become leaders themselves. They are almost ready."

The chamber grew very quiet then. A voice set him the challenge he knew would be coming. "How are they to learn then Kirk?"

He let his gaze swing from side to side, so each council member knew that he had searched them out individually and was speaking to them. "They must learn from someone just a little better than they are." Before they could formulate their questions, he leaped ahead. "The important question is not who they must learn from because we have seen these super operators that know all the moves. We have even all seen the leaders who have the spark that can start the desire for leadership in another."

He was already standing and now walked from side to side as if held in the throes of some great truth. "But these people are few! They are scattered about the fleet and are noticed when they use the resources they have at hand to be even better." Kirk paused for emphasis. "But where are these wonders?" He paused a beat. "In the fleet!"

He could see the confusion and knew that finally one of them would pose the question. "But of course, the fleet. Where else would we have them?"

Kirk seemed to ponder this. "Let me ask you this. Is there a ship in the fleet right now that has the best captain? The best second officer? The best chief engineer? The best navigator, security chief, communicator?!

Kirk knew the answer. His ship had been used as the standard to shoot for months running. "But your ship has that distinction Kirk."

Kirk looked shocked. "And you would destroy the standard of my ship, so another might have an excellent chief engineer? So another ship might have a better chief of security? A better

navigator?" Kirk paused. Then more loudly, "Is that what you want?"

"But of course!"

Then he shocked them by agreeing. "Yes! That only makes sense." He frowned as if he were thinking. He consulted with Tarl, confirming what he already knew and then turned and blasted them again. "I am reminded of the ship, 'Strong Hand'." He gave them a moment to remember. "One of the finest ships in the fleet! Some of the best men aboard her!" He knew they had remembered now.

"What happened to her?" he had lowered his voice. Then he spoke louder. "What happened to the 'Strong Hand'?

Again came the expected answer. "It was destroyed by the Klingons."

"Destroyed by the Klingons! How could they do that? Did the Captain give up?"

"NO!" It was a shout by one of the councilmen. "He did not give up! He was my son!"

"Then was it the navigator that steered them to destruction?"

"NO!" It was a shout by another councilman. "That was my son. One of the finest navigators in the fleet."

Kirk shouted now. "Wait! I remember! It was an untrained and untried security man who had taken down the anomaly detectors, without entering it into the log! They couldn't even see the Klingons coming!" Kirk was even louder now. "All those fine, trained men. Wasted by a common error a trained man would never make. That captain should have been honored for taking an untried man and putting him with his prize crew!"

Shouts of 'YES' were led by the councilman who was the father. Kirk let the uproar die a little and just stood there before them. They could tell he had something to say. The chamber was suddenly quiet, and Kirk looked up at the council members.

"But we are doomed to repeat this tragedy. We are doomed to lose good, qualified men because the best method we have of training more leaders is to let the new men watch from a distance aboard their ships." Kirk paused and then looked thoughtful.

“We have spent years stealing everything we need from others. Can we steal the men we need?” Kirk shook his head as he answered his own question. “Is it a case of more money?” Again he shook his head. “We have stolen many things from our enemies.” He shook his head and his voice got louder. “But the thing of most value we have ignored.”

Cries of ‘What?’ and ‘What is it?” came from every quarter.

Kirk looked at them and said quietly. “Training.” At their confused looks he continued. “We haven’t stolen their training because we can’t. How can we steal a thing that you can’t touch? How can you steal it?”

Kirk walked back and forth twice and then swung to face them. “It’s an idea. It’s intangible. But we can steal it. We have stolen ideas before. Many times. We have stolen the thoughts that they write down. We have incorporated them as our own. But why don’t we steal the idea of how they train? Not only an individual. But a group!”

Kirk walked back and forth now, carried by the idea. “Imagine sending men aboard a star ship. And all of them trained! All of them proficient in some area!” He paused to let them get the idea. “A ship full of people who have already learned! Who won’t make the common mistakes that lose battles! Who are ready to learn even more!”

Kirk paused and stood even straighter and taller. “That is what you need to do with the people you take from me. The people who learned the basics and more. Let these people be your start in training others. But not on a ship, where much would be lost if there were a mistake.”

Kirk stood there a moment as they thought, then gathered Tarl with a look and left. They beamed back to the ship and waited.

Three days later, Kirk was on the bridge when a new directive came out from the Orion Council.

It is hereby decreed that effective immediately the following be created:

The Orion Organization Science Council

This Council will be charged with creating schools for the training of all-important studies. First among these will be:

Navigation
Science
Security
Engineering
Medical
Command

In creating this Council, we have scoured the entire structure of the Empire to have the best qualified person to head the council. To this end we have chosen **Tarl Meckna**. Tarl will report to the Orion Council alone in this regard.

This edict is effective immediately.

On the ship, Tarl was furious and this was a sight indeed as he was an exceptionally large man. Veins bulged in his neck and his color had deepened considerably. Kirk eyed the few items he had on shelves in his room and thought about moving this discussion to a room with less breakables.

They had been having this discussion for twenty minutes and Kirk made the effort to start anew. “Now, Tarl . . .”

“Arghhhh!” Tarl responded since he knew he was going to lose this argument.

“It’s inevitable, Tarl. You’ve got to be the best man for the job. You’re already in the Command structure; your background is in Engineering and you’ve stood in for the head of Security and the head of Navigation many times.”

It is hard for an Orion to guard his features, so they tend to show how their mind is working and the direction the argument was going to take. Tarl was truly a well-controlled individual because Kirk only saw a brief crafty look cross Tarl’s scary visage. Kirk was immediately wary because Tarl’s thoughts were often very coherent even when he was under a great deal of stress as he was now. Tarl didn’t want to go.

“I guess I will have to make the best of this situation,” he rumbled. Kirk frowned as he tried to follow Tarl’s latest direction.

“I will have to just be the outstanding Orion they expect me to be and build them the best schools.” Kirk was an accomplished negotiator. He could hear the tilt even in Tarl’s voice now.

“Which of course would have to have the best instructors.” Kirk eyed him as he waited for the other shoe to fall. “So, even though I hate to do it, I will have to obtain these people any way I can.” Kirk could feel the noose tightening. “So, I will have to take Scott, Sulu, Chekov, Uhura and McCoy with me when I go.”

There was a triumphant glow on Tarl’s face and Kirk was silent a moment to allow him this moment of supposed triumph. But Kirk had been negotiating before Tarl had been born. He had closed this particular loop before it even came up in Tarl’s, beginning to be, really devious mind.

Kirk smiled at him and Tarl’s face fell into a softer version of a Tasmanian Devil’s mask. He knew Kirk from the last year. Kirk could bluff with the best of them and Tarl would have to watch him closely. “I know what you’re saying, Tarl. But Councilman Kiling was most obstinate about it when I suggested it. He says that the best place for those five is at their stations on a starship, so they can see and develop primary methods for use by their trainees.” Kirk paused for a bare moment. “I think there’s two things behind his thinking.

“Number one, the Empire would have a constant supply of trainees from this ship to fill your instructor positions. They would have not only training but have been involved in battle situations which would make them better instructors.

Number two; he doesn’t want another instance like his son where inexperience was instrumental in his death and disgrace. That happens very much, and the Empire looks like a derelict running downhill. Can’t have that.”

Kirk had intentionally drawn out his explanation to allow Tarl to think of ways to counter it. He also wanted Tarl to stay on that line of thought and not find something more cogent that he hadn’t already covered. The silence stretched for long moments and then Tarl let out what for him was a sigh. Kirk recognized it because his massive shoulders slumped at the same time.

“Alright. Alright.” Tarl looked up and directly at Kirk. “But this isn’t over.” Tarl’s brow furrowed even more than usual. “I’m

going to be very busy building my Empire the best schools they have ever seen. And manned by the best people available." He emphasized his point with one massive finger. "But I will be leaving there. And when I do, I will be coming back here."

The finger poked the air between them again. "I will figure out a way to get those people. Even if I have to wait for Kiling to die!" His voice rose on the last thought. But he rapidly remembered himself and assumed a more subservient posture. "Sir." He added as an afterthought.

Kirk rose and moved closer to the huge being. He reached up, clapped him on the shoulder and smiled. He spoke softly. "You really are the best, Tarl. I fought to keep you, but they were adamant. It had to be you." Kirk dropped his hand. "Don't change. Don't give up your beliefs and principles. Even if you do manage to wrest one of my people away from me, I want it to be because you tried me and found me wanting in some way." Kirk chuckled a little. "Like that's going to happen."

Kirk had built a genuine affection for the large first officer and hated to lose him. Tarl had developed a grudging respect for this puny human who managed to feel and find his way in and out of the most dangerous situations. "I'll find that way," Tarl rumbled as he moved past him and out the door. Kirk stood there for a minute, sighed and went to the bridge.

Chapter Sixteen
"Overload and Complications"

With Tarl gone, Kirk had to pick up a lot of the minor administrative duties he had been handling. And since Tarl had been his science officer as well as his exec, Kirk was really backed up for a few months. Except for a few rocky places, things ran relatively smoothly.

One of the rocky places was the custom of the exec eating the noon meal with the crew. The purpose was for the command section to make sure the crew were getting the nutritious food that had been planned and not some relatively bland menu items like plangs, which were similar to the human potato.

The Orion crew did have one favorite, Zantar haunch. They had developed the taste from the Klingon ships they had attacked and defeated. The crew loved it and Kirk made sure the food stations were programmed with it four days of the week. He was a big meat eater himself but for some reason, didn't like the Zantar meat.

It wasn't until McCoy and Sulu accompanied him to the crew mess area one day for lunch that he realized why. They had gotten their trays and sat down and the Orions had made fun of the earthlings as usual for not having a huge helping of Zantar and instead having a salad, which they considered cattle food.

Kirk put up with the insults, throwing a few of his own at the amiable large creatures about their size and clumsiness. Sulu laughed with him and then shook his head. "I thought for a minute there that you were going to eat some of that stuff."

Kirk finished his mouthful and murmured, "I can't stomach it today. It wouldn't be good for them to see their Captain puking his guts out over food." Kirk sipped at his tea. "I don't know what it is but that Zantar makes me sick. I had McCoy check it for something that affects humans and not Orions, but he couldn't find anything." Kirk stopped when he saw the look that Sulu was giving him. "What's the matter?" Sulu had put his utensils down and looked a little green.

Sulu breathed deeply for a moment, sipped at his tea and then sighed while Kirk eyed him anxiously. McCoy who had seen a great deal of sickness wasn't affected and paused after a bite of salad. "Couldn't find anything chemically in it. What did it taste like?"

Kirk welcomed the distraction to give Sulu a chance to recover from whatever had affected him so seriously. "Seemed to be kind of bland like chicken. But it has a little gaminess like venison." Kirk pondered as he drank. "I guess it had a little greasiness like eating duck." Kirk glanced at Sulu and put his glass down. "Do you need the Doctor's assistance?"

Sulu had his napkin pressed to his mouth and, after a minute, looked up at the overhead and coughed twice as he bent a little to Kirk, like he was pointing something out to the Captain to cover his difficulty. As the majority of the crew looked up, Sulu said casually so others at the next table couldn't hear. "And how would you compare the Zantar to Klingon?"

Kirk looked at Sulu like he was crazy. "Klingon? What are you talking about? We don't eat Klingons. They may be as despicable as a snake, but we don't eat them!" Kirk muttered to himself as he sipped at his drink. "Eat a damned sentient being." Kirk turned to Sulu. "How could you even . . ." he started hotly and then made the connection.

Kirk's mouth hung open as he stared at Sulu and McCoy laughed, reached across and used a finger to close it. "Easy there, Jim." He frowned as he looked back and forth between the two of them as they continued to stare at each other. McCoy sighed and pushed his plate back. He smacked his drink on the table to get their attention as he stood. "Down to sickbay." Kirk started to speak and McCoy cut him off. "Now!"

Kirk and Sulu stood and he herded them to sickbay and sat them down. A moment later he had handed them a glass each with a little green liquid in it. "Drink," he commanded. And they did. Four eyes opened wide as two throats noisily swallowed. And swallowed again. Sulu gasped and Kirk looked at McCoy as he croaked, "What is that stuff?"

McCoy laughed at their discomfort. "Ethanol. Most of my ancestors mixed it with fruit juice when they made it."

Kirk looked at the bottle. “Moonshine?”

“Kentucky’s finest.” McCoy put the bottle away. “Lucky to get it.” McCoy chuckled, “Did the job, didn’t it?”

Kirk started to nod and then turned to Sulu. “You were telling me that Zantars are sentient beings?” Sulu nodded. “Since when? We’ve been to Zantar.”

Sulu nodded. “And those gentle creatures that you ran around with on that plain are sentient. The researchers that we left there discovered tools and eating utensils in caves. Seems that what we saw are the kids. All they do is run and run until they’re ten years or so. Then they undergo a hormonal change that changes something in their head and they develop grasping pads on those top two arms.”

McCoy looked thoughtful for a moment. “He’s right now that I think about it. Remember? They had a game. Took you the best part of the day to figure it out since you couldn’t talk to them. But it was more than the learning type of chasing and twisting and turning you see animals doing to learn their taught fears and body limits. That should have been the first indicator.”

Kirk shook his head. “The question is, what are we going to do about it?”

Sulu shook his head too. “Nothing to do now. You were the last of our people, so I know none of us will be eating that.”

Kirk frowned. “But what about the Orions? We have to tell them.”

McCoy nodded. “Yeah. But what they do from that point is up to them.”

Kirk shook his head again. Sometimes the weight of command didn’t involve a real enemy. But he couldn’t let it go.

Two months later, a doubly wearied Kirk sat in his quarters, pondering the trials of that particular day and watching the Engineering trainees go through another drill on his monitor. Kirk was naturally an all or nothing kind of person and filling in for Tarl as well as doing his own job had weighed heavily upon him until Sulu had offered to take over some of the responsibilities.

It was exactly what Kirk had been trying to avoid. He wanted his people at maximum efficiency. They couldn't do that doubling up on extra jobs.

His door buzzed softly and he knew it was one of his people hoping that he was asleep but wanting to talk to him if he wasn't. "Enter," Kirk called out and looked to see who it was.

In trooped Uhura, followed by Chekov, Sulu and Scott; two standing to the right and two to the left. Down the center strode McCoy in his dress uniform and stopped next to Kirk and drew a huge device from behind him that Kirk had never seen before. He didn't pause but pushed buttons, turned dials and made adjustments as he panned one flexible extremity around Kirk's head. The device beeped slowly, stopped at one spot and then beeped until McCoy got to his eyes and then beeped faster. McCoy grimaced and put the flexible wand down and hit a switch and the whole thing quieted down.

McCoy turned his back on Kirk and faced the other four. "It's as I suspected, men. The Captain has been inhabited by a dangerous thought that centers at his eyes. It causes him to see things only his way. It has caused him to think that he is utterly indispensable and can do two jobs at once." All four looked sad and nodded.

"Another part of his brain has been short circuited and has lost the rational part of his thinking so that he cannot see the positive advantages of spreading out the extra jobs he has inherited so that each person will be doing just a minimum of extra work," McCoy continued softly and sadly.

Uhura bent her head and sniffled as if she was crying and Chekov, standing next to her, patted her back solicitously as he and the other two men bent their heads and sadly shook them. Uhura finally looked up at McCoy and sniffed as she asked, "Is there any hope, Doctor?"

McCoy shook his head as he looked at them all. "I have been this man's physician for some years and know that he has a background aliment called 'Hard Headedness' that makes any answer I can come up with almost useless. Unless I can get him to read and obey this prescription."

McCoy turned, held up a piece of paper and waved it twice. The rest looked between him and the paper hopefully. Kirk had long ago seen what was going on and decided to go along with it. He glanced at all of them and then very seriously took the paper and read it. He saw at a glance that it was all the assorted duties of the First Officer neatly divided among the four of them with one 'chore' highlighted and left for him. He would still have to eat lunch with the crew.

The list forced a smile from Kirk and the others relaxed. McCoy reached over, took both his glasses off the sideboard, handed one to Kirk and kept the other. Scott pulled a bottle of potent looking scotch from behind his back and magically all four drew glasses out. Scott made his first offer to Kirk and Kirk held his glass out, waited until all of them had their glasses filled and then raised his in a toast. "To good friends."

All smiled and drank. Then Kirk frowned in mock anger. "I can't believe the whole command structure is here! Who's running the ship?" The four operational department heads looked at each other and started pointed fingers at each other and muttering. Kirk finally laughed and shooed them out of his cabin. "You'd better all have a handle on it tomorrow with all these extra jobs!" Kirk shouted at the closing door behind the four as they left with many protestations of having everything under control. The door closed, and Kirk turned to McCoy. "Thanks, Bones."

McCoy smiled, "The prescription was my idea. The rest was all them. Good night, Jim." As he spoke, he was rinsing the glasses and then left. Kirk thought for a moment, cleaned up and was in bed in ten minutes. For the first time in a long time, he was asleep in minutes.

Two weeks later a much-refreshed Kirk bounded onto the bridge feeling great. The shifting of the other jobs had worked well and he, and all the others, were rested and back up to optimal. McCoy was waiting for him and Kirk could tell from the look on McCoy's face that the news wouldn't be good. Kirk sat in the command chair and waited with a brow cocked at McCoy.

McCoy finished talking with Uhura and came over to the command chair. "A message came in an hour ago. Since it was

essentially a medical message, Uhura notified me since you weren't here yet. There's no priority assigned to it. It's just informational, right now."

Kirk frowned. "It doesn't sound good so far. What is it?"

McCoy spat it out like it tasted bad. "Martian Flu."

Kirk jerked as if struck. "Martian Flu? But we took care of that years ago. You developed the vaccine yourself." Martian Flu had been bad news. Striking any closed systems, whether a ship or a country and spreading by air. Any physical communication would be almost sure to spread it. There had been a week-long incubation period and a three-week period when the afflicted were in bed, unable to even stand in most cases. Severe dehydration. High temperature. And, if not treated, death.

"The good news is, I think the vaccination that you and the others of the old crew had will hold now. In any case, I have a supply of that on hand. I had brought it with me. Seemed like a good thing to have." McCoy halted, and Kirk frowned.

"And the bad news is?" Kirk started.

"The vaccine doesn't work on the Orions," McCoy said softly.

As soft as it was spoken, the trainee on the helm heard and turned. "Excuse me, Captain. But did the Doctor say that the Orion people are susceptible to the disease?" Chekov was on the weapons station and tried to divert the Orion's attention, but Kirk stopped him.

"Let me answer his question, Chekov. We'll be notifying the crew and Orion Central as soon as we have the all facts straight." Kirk turned to the Orion trainee and frowned. "Skink, isn't it?" The Orion nodded. He was a little older than the normal trainee and Kirk remembered he had done exceptionally well on the testing. "We just have a preliminary report, Skink, but I will be happy to tell you what it says and explain."

"Thank you, Captain," the Orion said.

Kirk was silent a moment. "I'm not going to make this sound better than it actually is." Skink nodded, a trait he had picked up from the humans. "Martian Flu hit the Federation about three years ago," Kirk glanced at McCoy and he nodded. "It is a very nasty disease and there is almost no control over it. We

were fortunate in that Doctor McCoy was able to work out a formula that gave us a vaccine that worked."

McCoy stepped in and spoke for the first time. "The important thing was we were able to stop the suffering. We had tens of thousands of people who were reduced to laying on their beds and hurting. They were so weak they couldn't even get up, much less perform a function like on a Starship like this."

Skink nodded and said, "But you developed a vaccine?"

"Yes." McCoy paused. "But that's why the Captain wants to get all the facts. It seems that an Orion has contracted the disease." McCoy grimaced. "And the vaccine didn't work on him."

Skink nodded as he learned. "And what did they do?"

"They isolated him as soon as possible. But the disease is spread through the air. And while the humans in contact didn't get the disease, they were transmitters to the other Orions present." McCoy nodded to himself as he continued. "They had a good man in charge and he put the humans and the Orions all in quarantine. That put a stop to the spread. But it's a very virulent disease."

Skink looked confused. "I am not familiar with the term virulent, Doctor."

McCoy frowned as he thought for a moment and then almost smiled. "Did you ever try and keep the grinchen out of your garden at home?"

At first there was comprehension on Skink's face and almost a smile as he remembered. Then the full import of what the Doctor was saying hit him and his mouth opened in shock. "But they are everywhere! There is no way to keep them out!"

McCoy nodded gravely. "That's the way the disease is too. Almost impossible to control." McCoy stopped and looked around. "Why on a ship like this where everything is tied together, to have one person get it is to have everyone get it. Bad news."

Kirk broke in to end the session. "We will NOT have the Martian Flu on this ship. We'll keep you informed of any word we get." Skink nodded and turned back to his station and signaled to Chekov that he was taking control of the Navigation console.

But since there was no security involved and the Orion trainees often were manning the Comm station, the word was

spread before Kirk even knew what had come in. Everybody was keeping very close track of this one.

Then came the call to Chenla. They were the closest starship to help fight off the Klingon attack and they responded immediately. It wasn't often that the Klingons came that far into Orion space, but the temptation of the dilithium made it seem worthwhile.

There were two Klingon ships and they were bombarding the two stations on the planet hard with phaser fire as well as an advance team picking off the members of the team in place to mine the dilithium as they ran for cover outside the facility.

When Kirk came out of warp, they were two million miles away. "Chekov, maximum shields on forward. Sulu. Bring us in at full impulse." Kirk turned to Uhura. "Scramble subspace." Back to Sulu. "Put us a dead stop right between them for eight seconds. Chekov. When we stop, two photon torpedoes at each ship. Sulu. After eight seconds, full impulse toward the planet and turn us around to face the Klingons. All stop before we reach the atmosphere. Chekov. All phasers on standby."

The Orion trainees that were on the bridge stayed out of the way and just watched. The humans seem to move at super speed carrying out the Captain's commands. It took them a moment to realize that they were anticipating the commands slightly. The well trained among them watched their trainers. The slow ones looked at the display screen in the front of the bridge and were mesmerized and unable to look away.

The Klingons predictably fired at the empty space between them after the ship had moved. Since they had increased shields on that side, the remaining shields were at a lower capacity. Chekov spoke quickly. "Ship on the right has shields at twenty percent."

"Target and fire at will," Kirk responded, and twin beams of scintillating energy shot across the empty space and shook the Klingon ship. The Orion trainee at the science station spoke for the first time. "Captain." Kirk pointed at the second ship and told Chekov to fire a spread of photon torpedoes. He glanced at the Orion. "Speak. Don't wait."

"Ship on the left has shields set at 200 Gigahertz!"

“Chekov. Adjust and fire photon torpedoes twice,” Kirk spat. Chekov’s hands flew and another brace of photon torpedoes flew at the Klingon again. “Sulu. Burst of phasers at completion. Target command pod of ship on the left.”

Sulu shouted, “Incoming!”, and seconds later the ship shook as the first Klingon ship targeted them finally. Chekov read his boards. “Shields at 85% Captain!”

“Sulu. One second jog at sublight. Fire on Klingon ship on right at completion,” Kirk nodded as Sulu moved to obey. The trainees saw Sulu pause in the midst of the move and fire the phasers at the second ship. The photons had just struck it and shield energy was fluctuating wildly all over the ship. The sustained phaser burst found a crack in the compromised shield energy and the command pod separated from the ship and tumbled off into space.

Meanwhile the ship moved the one second jog and phasers from the Klingon ship shot through the empty space. Then the Klingon ship swung to follow the detached command pod from the other ship and their second phaser shot missed as well. Chekov was still firing at will and the unprotected rear of the Klingon ship exploded. His second blast hit the power plant and the ship disappeared into an expanding cloud of light and loose energy.

Kirk hit a button on his armrest. “Bridge to transporter.”

The quick response came. “Grath here Captain.”

Kirk nodded. Grath was one of the better trainees. “Grath. Target life signs on the Klingon command pod and energize. But do not materialize yet. Repeat. Do not materialize yet.”

“Aye, Captain. I’ll hold them in stasis and wait for your command.”

Chekov got up and motioned for a trainee to take his place as he headed for the transporter room. He struck his communicator and issued orders for security to meet him in the transporter room. Kirk nodded and turned to Uhura who responded without being asked. “Klingon command pod drifting out of subspace range, Captain. Message traffic cut off at transport.”

“Anything get through?” Kirk asked.

“No, Captain.”

Kirk nodded and rose. “I’ll be in the transporter room.”

Kirk entered the transporter room, noted the security men positioned around the transporter stage and nodded at Chekov. McCoy stood by the console and nodded at Kirk as he joined him and Grath. “Four in stasis. Standing by, sir.”

“Very well. Bring them in, Mr. Grath,” Kirk said carefully.

Four shapes materialized. Two were standing. One was kneeling and holding up the fourth. The fourth was bleeding. McCoy started to move forward and stopped at a motion from Kirk. Kirk read the insignia of the Klingon supporting the other. “With your permission, Captain.”

At the Klingon’s nod, McCoy moved forward. The security men tracked every motion. The Klingon Captain stood and watched McCoy work for a moment. He looked up at Kirk and nodded, “This one knows Klingon physiology. He is very good.” He held his head a little higher. “I am Captain K’Lanth.”

Kirk raised an eyebrow and nodded appreciatively. “The Doctor is Leonard McCoy.”

The Klingon Captain turned to look at McCoy again and then stiffened. He turned back to Kirk and motioned at his two men. He looked at the floor as he spoke. “Please have your security men remove these two before they do something and embarrass me.”

Kirk nodded at Chekov and Chekov nodded at two of his men who manacled the two Klingons and led them off. Kirk turned back to the Klingon Captain but that one was silent until the doors closed. He looked back at Kirk. “Your Doctor is McCoy. He is not Orion. He is your Doctor. You are both human. Are you James Kirk?”

Kirk nodded, and Chekov caught the slight motion and he and his men intensified their vigilance. The Klingon Captain nodded. “The Gods are indeed aligned against me.”

“I remember you, Captain,” Kirk started. “As you know, I was at Alpha Lauri Two also.”

“Yes, Kirk. I remember well. I was ashamed to have lost my ship then and after two demeaning assignments had worked

my way back up to Captaincy again." He sighed deeply. "How is it that the Gods have sent you here now, so many light years, on an Orion ship to defeat me again?"

"I was disgraced too. I stole my old ship back from my commanders, lost her to Captain Kruge and then found my way back with his ship. They did not give me a second chance. The only ones who would give me another chance were the Orions. That is how I am here now." Kirk shook his head. "It is a long, hard road back to the Captain's chair. At least you could stay with your people."

The Klingon laughed. "Yes. I traveled that road and lost my ship again. To the same man!" He laughed again and then held out his hands for the manacles. "I am ready for your security station."

Kirk motioned at Chekov who was moving forward, and Chekov put his manacles away. "There is no need for manacles on such a proud and worthy warrior."

Captain K'Lanth straightened again and nodded to Kirk; the nod of one warrior to another. They left and Kirk headed back to the bridge. He knew McCoy would keep him informed as soon as he knew something. He had just signed the fuel consumption report when McCoy came onto the bridge. From his expression, Kirk knew to brace himself. McCoy handed Kirk a datapad and nodded at the trainees. Kirk read it silently and then spoke to Uhura. "Department Head meeting in one hour in conference room three. Mandatory. No trainees."

"Aye, aye, sir." Uhura answered and passed the word.

Kirk entered the conference room with McCoy in tow after having been thoroughly advised. In addition to the Department Heads, the Klingon Captain was also present. Kirk waited until McCoy seated himself and readied the presentation he would make before addressing the Klingon Captain. "Captain. Would you mind explaining who the wounded Klingon is?"

The Klingon Captain nodded. "He is Counselor K'Leef. He is a direct representative from the high council."

Kirk nodded. "I take it he joined you recently?"

K'Lanth nodded again. "This is true. He had recently arrived by unmanned shuttle from the home world. Just before our . . . skirmish, actually. Why do ask, Kirk?"

"Because I have two pieces of news; one good, one bad. I'll give you the good news first. He will live." Kirk stopped for a moment and sighed. "I'll let Doctor McCoy inform all of you of the second piece of news." Kirk gestured to McCoy as he spoke, and the group looked at the Doctor with interest.

McCoy was not a beat-around-the-bushes kind of guy. "I'll give you the important part first and then let you ask questions." McCoy took a breath and shook his head. "The representative is infected with Regillian Fever. The incubation period is four days." McCoy paused and looked at the Klingon Captain. "I don't think Klingon medical science has come up with a cure yet, but I have to ask."

K'Lanth shook his head and then jerked in realization. "But I am a hazard to you! I am contagious!"

Kirk shook his head. "When we beamed him aboard, the automatic filters in the transporter took out most of the dangerous diseases possible. But the good Doctor has informed me that Regillian Fever is transmitted by a mutating virus. It wasn't filtered by the transporter. And since the representative appears to have been infected himself four days ago, the virus has already been transmitted when he was being stabilized in the transporter room. Within two hours, the entire ship was infected."

The whole group was silent for a few minutes. Then Sulu spoke up. "I thought our last outfitting we were supplied with the latest in ship's filters. The physical ones. I thought they took out things down to three microns." Sulu looked at Scott for confirmation and Scott nodded as he spoke.

"Aye. That's true. Those were installed last week, Doctor. Wouldn't they protect us?"

"To some extent. But the immature virus is two microns in size. The new filters kept out about 80 - 85% of the total infection. That's why it took about two hours."

"K'Lanth told us about the Klingon medicine, but how about the Orions or the Federation?" Uhura threw in. McCoy shook his head. "The Orions steal most of their medical

advances. And the few contacts I have in the Federation, that will still speak to me, deny any progress. Face it. The only advances anyone has made on Regillian Fever is going to come from someone who has it or has to deal with it regularly."

There was quiet then as agile minds worked at logic and known facts. Kirk and McCoy watched the group come to the same conclusion that they had. It was Sulu who stated what everyone was thinking. "It seems, Doctor, that the only people that would have contact with Regillian Fever are the closest people to Rigel." There were nods around the table. "How do we get along with the Romulans?" Sulu asked knowing the answer already as all of them did.

Even the Klingon Captain grimaced in what normal people would be a smile. Kirk took over the conversation again. "Okay, people. Here's what's going to happen. First we will gather every bit of data we can about the Fever. We are starting a crash program to solve its medical problems. McCoy, that's your baby." McCoy nodded.

Kirk turned to Scotty and pointed. "Mr. Scott. I want some examination of the programming on that transporter filter. I am convinced there is something there that will solve our problems." Uhura got pointed at next. "Uhura, contact Starfleet and find out all they've got on this. Once you've exhausted all your sources there, find a way to get in touch with the Romulans. Once you've made contact, Captain K'Lanth and I will speak with them."

Sulu and Chekov were next. "When we get this thing isolated, we're going to need a force field that will allow humans to pass but will restrict all passage of this virus. I don't even know if that's possible. But give it a try."

Kirk let them digest that for a minute. "Okay. We will have a daily Department Head meeting to discuss what results we've made and listen for suggestions from anyone else. Let's share ideas and get this thing beat. Dismissed"

Chapter Seventeen
"Something Goes Right"

In two weeks, they had gone through hundreds of ideas and had to discard them all. Kirk called the daily meeting to order. "Bones," he called on McCoy first.

"Nothing," the Doctor responded sourly.

Kirk looked a little surprised. "I thought you were going to run the Mercado series with the Folsum regeneration last night?"

McCoy looked disgusted. "We did."

"And," Kirk prompted.

"And it didn't work!" McCoy almost shouted. "Everything so far has been a failure, Captain! Does that cover it, Captain?"

But Kirk refused to be goaded. "Haven't you had one positive note in all the testing you've done, Doctor?"

McCoy acted like he had suddenly had an inspiration. "Why, yes! We did have one positive note!" He pointed at Uhura. "Commander Uhura tested negative for the Fever even though I know she's been exposed. We ran further tests and made some interesting discoveries.

"One – except for being female and having the female differences in her blood, it is exactly the same as Chekov's here." Chekov looked up briefly. "Except that it doesn't contain the virus.

"Two - since she was in close contact with some of the Orion members of her crew every day, I retested them and discovered they all have the virus in their blood. After two days, I tested Uhura again and found no trace of the virus even after having worked closely with personnel that did have the virus.

"Three – we intentionally infected her and tested her again the next day. She had no trace of the virus.

"Four – we did a slew of tests and finally infected a sample of her blood successfully that we had in the lab for testing. We injected the contaminated blood back into her system and tested her the next day. She had no trace of the contamination.

"Five – we injected some of her blood that had no contamination into Commander Chekov, who has the same blood type. The next day, he continued to test positive for the virus.

“Six – after numerous tests on her blood we came to the conclusion that the device that keeps her body clear of the contamination is in her body itself.

“Seven – after repeated and numerous tests on her person, we concluded that we can’t find the difference between her body and any normal female’s body.

“Eight – we recommended that she be transferred off ship just in case whatever is protecting her now decides to stop.

“Nine – the positive discovery remains although we can’t make any use of it. Commander Uhura is the healthiest among us all right now.”

Kirk had been nodding at each point that McCoy had covered. “Thank you, Doctor, for all the testing and the explanation. Commander Uhura.” Uhura looked up and sighed. She knew what Kirk wanted her to say.

“I have received word from the Orion High Council that they have requested my expertise on the new Orion ship that is having problems,” she said. “It is in for a major refit and their communications system still has problems. Their crew and the whole base are in isolation and none have the Flu so I won’t be endangered that way. Doctor McCoy insists that because my body removes the Fever from my system completely, I will not be a problem to them in that regard.”

Kirk looked around at his officers and all of them finally nodded. Kirk looked at Uhura. “You will be detached from duty here and ***temporarily*** transferred to the Orion High Council for further transfer upon arrival. We expect you back Commander.”

“Aye, sir,” Uhura commented sadly.

Kirk continued. “These meetings appear to have little positive effect. Are there any objections to shifting to a weekly meeting?” Everyone shook their head. “Next meeting is hereby scheduled for one week from today. Any positive results of any kind will be reported to me directly if discovered before the next meeting. Dismissed.

A week later, Uhura was gone and Kirk eyed his remaining crew as they sat around the table. Everyone except McCoy was there and Kirk decided to start without him. “Scotty?”

Everyone looked at the dour Scotsman, but he just shook his head. “I’ve been through that filter program a dozen times.” Kirk could tell from the brogue that Scot was upset. “The problem on one hand is the size of this beastie. In all actuality, it’s a pretty big virus. Making the filter tighter to filter it out though would make the filter too tight for a few other wee things to get through.”

McCoy broke in as he came in and sat at his place. “Yeah. Specifically, the virus that the body develops to combat the old Earth Reinlin Fever. Everyone is exposed to it and develops the virus and their body automatically lives with it until it needs it. They never notice it. Pull out that virus and people would start getting sick for apparently no reason.”

“And that’s not the only thing,” Scotty continued. “If ye ignore the size and concentrate on its structure you find that is has basically the same structure as a half dozen viruses the body develops in response to vaccines we have to take to go into space.” Scotty paused and shook his head. “There’d be a lot of sick puppies around if ye got rid of them.”

Kirk shook his head as well. Obviously, his people had put a lot of time in on this. Kirk looked between Sulu and Chekov. Chekov sighed and Sulu waved him on. “We thought we might have had a breakthrough when we isolated the structure. The object was to keep the virus in a confined space. And if it held a few other things, then no harm would be done. It would still perform its main function.”

Sulu picked up when Chekov got disgusted. “We tried it on one of the trainees inadvertently. We had built up the force field around a tech manual we had on the bench. One of the trainees came in and reached to pick up the manual, before we saw what he was doing.”

McCoy cut in again. “That would be the young fellow that came down to sickbay with a burned hand.”

Sulu nodded. “He pulled the manual out and the force field pulled out certain parts of the paper the manual was printed on in addition to what it did to him. And the ink the manual was printed with. We ended up with one burnt hand, one mass of cellulose outside the force field and another inside the force field. The pile

outside the force field was pure white. The one inside was a dirty gray where the ink had mixed with it. Interesting but not helpful."

Kirk nodded again. "One purpose of these meetings is to bring all the research we have done out on the table, so everyone has some benefit from it. I can see from your reports that you have each done a lot of research and have been in contact with your other teammates as well. Please continue to talk to each other. Next meeting is one week from today. Dismissed."

But even with the helpful, healthy regimen McCoy had everyone on, more and more people got sick. By the end of the third week, Kirk was among the few that could still navigate the hallways of the ship. Kirk walked all the way down to sickbay and marveled that he hadn't see anyone on the way. The corridors were deserted.

In sickbay, he was directed to a nearby storeroom. The stores had been moved out and McCoy and a few of his crew are tending to the needs of rows and rows of sick. Kirk stopped McCoy. "Well, Doctor. What were the results of the acetyl-choline test?"

McCoy looked up, distracted and had to focus on Kirk. "Haven't run it yet. Need a little more time. Maybe tonight." McCoy mumbled, and his attention was captured by another sick Orion's cries for water and he left Kirk to tend to the man. Kirk started to say something and then stopped and just walked off.

Kirk thought as he walked and ended up at the Klingon's cabin. He was admitted and Captain K'Lanth was still trying to rise from his bed when Kirk came in and then pushed him easily back down. "Just listen." Kirk paused to wipe the sweat from his own face. "We are one light-year from Penta-Mangare. Klingons have an outpost there. Is it still manned?"

K'Lanth shook his massive head. "They closed the facility down when the dilithium turned out to be so hard to mine." He took a couple of deep breaths. "The facility is empty now. You have need of it?"

"Yes. We can use the space for our sick. Can we get it?" Kirk queried.

“Yes. The Klingons have no use for it and it stands empty. I will get an edict from the Klingon High Council ceding the facility temporarily to the Orions.”

Kirk looked doubtful. “They will do this? For the Orions?”

K’Lanth caught his breath. “The councilor in charge of off planet facilities is my brother. I will get the edict.”

Kirk nodded and left. Two days later, arrangements were made, and Kirk beamed down to the planet’s surface with K’Lanth to make sure everything was as they said. It was. Kirk set a few of the engineers to get things ready and then started the beam down of the equipment they would need. Another day was spent beaming down the stores and arranging the beds and cabinets.

The next day was the beam down of the entire Orion crew. Few of them had gotten better once they had sunk to the sick list. Those individuals that were feeling better were used to help take care of the others. No special medical knowledge was necessary. They were all only caring for basic needs of their charges.

Kirk pulled McCoy aside at the end of that day. “Okay, McCoy. You have one day to make any changes to set things up your way. One day. The next morning, Chekov and I will be down here with manacles to carry you back to the ship.”

“But, Jim . . .” McCoy started.

“No. One day. You will be coming back.” McCoy knew when to argue and when to shut up. Kirk was very serious.

McCoy nodded. “Aye, aye, sir!” he saluted as a final act of defiance.

Kirk nodded and left McCoy to his tasks. The next day had the command crew working to get all controls up to the bridge since they were the only ones on the ship. There were a few complications and even McCoy was pressed into service to get things completed. It took almost three days, but everything could be run from the bridge.

McCoy came onto the bridge the next day as preps were being made to get underway. “I’d like a few hours to make a final check on the planet and collect some reports they have been making for me.”

“Good idea, Bones. Make your checks this morning and we’ll get underway this afternoon,” Kirk said as he signed off on a

report Sulu had given him. McCoy snuck out before Kirk could change his mind.

McCoy was soon engrossed in his work on the planet and realized how long he had been gone when it started to get dark. But he was satisfied because he knew he had limited time and made the best use of it by training his workers in better methods instead of doing the work himself. He hurried back to the ship with his reports carefully preserved on a disk.

They were underway within the hour. Kirk had the entire command crew on the bridge for a meeting. “Gentlemen. We are underway for Orion. We are going to transport a thousand Orions at a time to various locations throughout their Empire where mass hospital facilities have been set up. They will act much the same as the facility we just set up with the exception that they will have been possibly subjected to both diseases where our people, that we left at our facility, have not been exposed to the Flu.

“We have learned that when the Orions contract both diseases, they die within a day. We are not worried about contamination because we are protected by Doctor McCoy’s serum for the Flu. The Orions we are transporting will be confined to decks 16, 17, 18 and 19. These areas have already been prepared and stocked for the entire time it takes to get to the hospital planets.”

Kirk paused to wipe his face and then looked around. “Make no mistake. These are Orions we are transporting. They have medical personnel with them. They are, generally speaking, larger and stronger than we are. Some of them will be delirious with pain. There will be no contact with them by any of our crew unless cleared through me. We are trying to keep possible contamination to a minimum. I would much rather err on the side of being too careful. Any questions?”

There were no questions and they soon dispersed to their duties and their research. The bridge was set up as a watch for one person and all the command crew took an eight-hour turn, except for McCoy, and slept when they could.

It was morning of the next day when Kirk was awakened from a bare two hours of sleep by repeated notice from his door and some hammering. He sat up and allowed entrance. McCoy

came in, excitedly waving a sheet of paper. Kirk frowned as he concentrated on McCoy's grinning face and said, "This better be important."

"How about a clue on the Rigellian Fever!" McCoy almost chortled. Kirk wiped at his face and sat up straighter. His expression said he wanted more. McCoy didn't disappoint. "It took me a little while to work my way through the reports that our facility gave me, and I finished up this morning. I contacted them and confirmed what I thought the reports were saying."

"Which is," Kirk prompted.

"The percentage of well people who had the disease has increased to 47%. That means that almost half of the people there are up and about," McCoy continued excitedly. "When we left the percentage was 6% and we didn't see it going up by much."

Kirk was completely awake now. "So what happened? What's doing it?"

"That was my first thought! When I contacted them, I had them do some additional tests. The people that are well have a mutated form of the virus in their systems. It seems to be acting like a vaccine."

"Which seems to point to the environment," Kirk opined.

"Yes. Do you think the Klingons used some esoteric building material that's doing it?" McCoy shot back.

Kirk thought a moment. "I doubt it, Bones. We've gotten samples of their materials before. It's pretty much like ours."

Suddenly they looked at each other. "The DILITHIUM!" Then McCoy calmed down right away. "No. Otherwise Scotty and his people would have never gotten sick. They're right down there with it."

"Right. Except that our dilithium is so shielded, I doubt that any radiation gets out."

McCoy was back to excited again. "Then we have to get back there and do some tests!"

Kirk held up a hand. "As soon as we drop off our charges. We don't have enough supplies to keep them indefinitely. And I know how you are when you're on a lead like this."

McCoy started to speak again but he stopped when he knew that Kirk was right. Then he thought of the other thing that he needed to tell Kirk. “There is another piece of news that isn’t so good.”

Kirk sighed. “Come on, Bones. I don’t know what I’d do if I could stay up for a while.”

McCoy just fiddled with the monitor on Kirk’s desk. After a moment he stood back. Kirk moved over and looked at the picture of his former first officer in a bed in the confided space. “Damn. I didn’t even know he was aboard.”

McCoy finished the bad news. “If you have any words for him, you better say them fast.”

Kirk was shocked. “He’s dying? But he’s much stronger than many of the other Orions.”

“When you have one disease and contract the other, you only have a day at most,” McCoy concluded.

Kirk rammed his hand into the monitor, shutting it off. “That’s not fair! He’s one of the best Orion’s I’ve ever met!” Kirk paced for a moment and then stopped in front of McCoy. “He’s not going to die. I’ll find a way. But he’s not going to die.” McCoy patted his back and left.

A few hours later, Kirk gathered McCoy up and escorted him down to engineering. McCoy didn’t know what he wanted but suited up in the bio/contaminant suit. “Get Tarl! Bring him down here as soon as you can.”

McCoy knew when Kirk was on a hunch and decided to humor him. When he got back with Tarl, Kirk had finished suiting up also. Kirk was shocked at how bad Tarl looked. Tarl had no shirt on and his body was bathed in sweat. The once great muscles had softened and Tarl could barely stand.

“Tarl. Tarl!” Tarl managed to look up. “We have a lead on curing the Fever. It involves exposure to dilithium. Are you willing to try?”

The once deep rumble was barely a croak. “I have nothing to lose, Kirk. Please.” Kirk nodded and propped him up so Tarl could hold on to some pipes. “Hurry, Kirk. Please hurry.”

Kirk nodded and backed away, motioning at Scotty who was in the control room. Scott worked the controls and a panel in

front of Tarl cracked open and stopped after an inch. Tarl was bathed in the coppery glow and stood a little straighter as the dilithium bombarded him.

After a moment, Scotty closed the small opening and then waved at McCoy who leaped forward and ran a diagnostic tool over Tarl's shaking body. "Yes! The parasites have been depleted by 12%. This is working." McCoy adjusted his device and made a second pass. He continued in a much lower voice. "But his physical reserves have been depleted by 21%." McCoy put the device away and looked at Kirk. His look spoke of the dejection he felt at the results of their experiment and the hope that remained for the millions of others.

Kirk looked at Tarl and Tarl looked back. "I am done, Kirk." He looked over at McCoy. "Unless the good Doctor has finally managed to program that piece of junk he carries around for good Orion Naerfet?"

McCoy searched for a moment and then smiled. "I did manage that. You big babies needed it so badly as a cure for almost everything." McCoy made another adjustment, pressed the dispenser to Tarl's arm and there was a slight hiss as the medicine entered Tarl's body.

McCoy knew the drug would cause a mild numbness in Tarl's arms and inject some supplements he hadn't had time to fully examine yet but would help him a little. To his shock, Tarl shuddered violently and fell to the ground. McCoy was beside him in a second with his diagnostic tool humming again.

Once more McCoy looked up with astonishment at Kirk. "His reserves have taken a kick up but I'm not sure why. I mean it has to be the stuff I gave him. But I've never seen it do that before."

A heavy hand grabbed his arm and McCoy was surprised at the steel in it. Tarl managed to speak but still kept his eyes closed. "That was good Doctor. I think you got the formula right." He paused and caught his breath. "Now again. A double dose, I think, considering my size."

McCoy looked at Kirk and shook his head. At Kirk's questioning look, he amplified. "That did build up his reserves,

Jim. But it put a strain on his heart and liver. I think a heavier dose might kill him before it helps him!"

But before Kirk could speak, they were both astonished when Tarl gripped the piping and pulled himself up to a seated position. His eyes opened slowly, and he focused and looked around until he found Kirk. Some of the rumble was back as he spoke. "Jim. Please tell him it's alright. I am dead. Remember Correla? I am dead. Use me to help my people now."

Kirk's eyes lost their focus as he remembered the action they had fought against some Romulans. Tarl had been badly wounded and next to dead but Kirk had followed his instructions even though he knew the wounds would kill his first officer. After the medication, Kirk had turned away from an unconscious Tarl and back to fight only to be shocked when an invigorated Tarl had shifted a massive piece of construction material so that it gave them the protection they needed. Tarl had spent a day in sickbay when they had gotten back. But he was right. He should have been dead.

Kirk nodded at McCoy and indicated Tarl's body now lying beside them again. "He's already given his life. Don't let what remains be wasted." Kirk paused. "Do as he asks. Make it a double dose."

McCoy was torn between his Doctor's oath and his need to follow his Captain's orders. Since the patient had requested it . . . McCoy said, "What the hell." He adjusted his device again and didn't pause but pressed it against Tarl's clammy skin and injected the medicine.

It was well that he had moved back as he put the device away as Tarl's sudden movements and thrashing would have struck him and possibly hurt him. Tarl let out a massive bellow and his body almost flipped itself upright. His grip on a nearby pipe made the pipe groan under the pressure. His eyes opened wide and he looked right at Kirk. "Let's burn some Romulan tarkus!"

Kirk nodded and put out his arm and Tarl grabbed it. It was the same words that he had used then, and it showed Jim he was ready for most anything. Even death. Tarl released him and pushed him back. "See if we can get rid of these tiresome bugs."

He stood there, not restored but somehow the spirit had been rekindled within him. Kirk motioned McCoy back and then signaled Scotty for double the dose.

The opening appeared again but stayed open twice as long. When it closed, McCoy was instantly at Tarl's side. Tarl was shaking but had a strong grip on the piping. McCoy finished the diagnostic and looked at Kirk. "The infection is gone but it's a miracle that he's alive. We have to get this hulk to his isolation room."

Kirk strapped Tarl to the antigrav unit and he and McCoy maneuvered the bulky body back to the isolation room they had set up. They put him in the bed and set the diagnostics built into the bed. Tarl's body managed to push up the indicators. But just barely. McCoy gave him a few supplements and they left him. Kirk called a meeting on the bridge and an hour later, they were all there.

Kirk smiled at the others and gestured to McCoy. McCoy spoke but it was guardedly. "It appears we may have something to fight the Fever in the Orions with." At the other's interested looks he continued. "I just came from Tarl's isolation room for a final check on the way up here. He is doing well but he still has the Martian Flu. His body has been badly depleted, but he is a strong individual and is fighting back.'

McCoy looked over at Scotty and Scott continued. "Against my better judgment, I exposed Tarl to dilithium radiation. Apparently, that is what killed the Fever bugs in him. But we don't have a location that is built to do that kind of irradiation again. The walls and other equipment will just start to break down if we do."

McCoy picked it back up. "Nor do we have any more Orion horses to irradiate. I think anyone with less pure strength and spirit than Tarl would have died. So we have to find another way to use this knowledge."

After a moment, Sulu looked up and asked McCoy, "What made you think of the dilithium to begin with?"

McCoy started to answer and then stopped and looked over at Kirk. "I haven't had a chance to check in with them lately."

Kirk nodded and hit switches and then turned to McCoy who moved over by him.

"Orion Colony, Alpha1."

"This is Doctor McCoy. What is the status there?"

"Oh, Doctor McCoy! We recognized the ship's code. That's why we broke silence and answered."

"I need a report on conditions there," McCoy continued abruptly.

"Yes, sir. I'll get that for you right away." And McCoy was left looking at a blank screen as the Orion he was talking to terminated the link to go get the report. McCoy turned to Kirk and shrugged and Kirk pointed at the console and his look said "now". McCoy turned back and punched a button. A few minutes later he was connected again, but this time to a different individual.

"Oh, Doctor McCoy. I recognized the ship's code. That's why I broke silence." The individual looked almost like he had just awakened from a nap.

"Get one of the physician trainees on the circuit! Now!" McCoy barked.

"Yes, sir," the hapless individual answered, and this time McCoy was left with a picture of the room the individual had been in as he left to find a Doctor trainee. A frustrated McCoy looked back at Kirk and shrugged and then looked back. It was a few minutes until the Doctor trainee arrived.

"Ah! Doctor McCoy! Sorry it took so long to get back, but I was just finishing my match against that engineer. He was tough!" The Orion had a few scratches and one bloody spot but otherwise seemed happy enough.

"I need a report on conditions there," McCoy tried again.

"Yes. Yes. I have followed your instructions! As the men became better, I developed jobs for them to keep them busy. But there were a lot of fights as more and more of them got better. Finally, I developed a whole fight schedule to keep them busy. Now we have four arenas for the fights and one scheduled every twenty minutes, from eight in the morning until ten at night.

"At first I had a ladder built so they worked their way up. But they didn't like that so the fights are just free for all. Of course, some of the people don't want to fight. I've arranged for

them to take care of getting everyone fed and the synthesizers stocked with raw protein. I'm not sure if we'll run out of protein or water first."

McCoy stared at him for moment in shock. He was one of the brightest trainees he had! "A report. On conditions. Now!" McCoy stole a glance at Kirk and back at the screen. "Do. You. Under. Stand?"

His trainee smiled. "Oh, sure. Haven't needed one for a few days since everyone is well and all traces of the Fever are gone but I'm sure I have one stored in the computer here somewhere." For a few long moments the Orion punched at an associated computer and then brightened. Here's one that's only a day old! Transmitting now!"

McCoy started to say something and then stopped and shook his head. At sub-light speeds the report was soon there and McCoy opened it.

"Got it, Doc?" the trainee asked.

McCoy turned back and hesitated. "Yes. I have it. We'll be contacting you soon about our arrival time."

McCoy broke contact before the trainee could get started on some other inconsequential issue. He scanned the report and looked at Kirk in surprise. "We were right! All traces of the disease are gone! It has to be the dilithium."

Kirk thought for a moment and then turned to Sulu. "Let's head to the facility planet. It may be the best place for these people." He swung back to McCoy. "We have two more tests to perform Doctor."

McCoy nodded. "We have to see if the people who are free of the Fever are just temporarily cured or immunized. And we have to see if it works on humans."

"Keep working on the Martian Flu in any case. Dismissed."

Chapter Eighteen
"Some Answers, Some Death"

McCoy stepped onto the bridge, where Kirk was standing watch, and stopped at the command chair. "A positive answer to the first question." McCoy paused but Kirk kept on entering the parameters for their flight to the facility planet. McCoy just waited.

After a moment Jim looked at him. "How could you know so quickly? We need someone who is free of the disease by the dilithium to test. As far as I know . . ." Kirk stopped and looked at McCoy. "Not Tarl!"

McCoy held up a hand in defense. "Tarl showed up in my office. He was not only much better, but he wanted to know when he could be released." McCoy held up the hand again. "I told him in no way would he have access to the rest of the ship since he still had the Martian Flu in him."

Kirk's eyes sharpened. "To which he of course replied that he was free for any medical tests then."

"I fully explained the nature of the tests and the purpose of them. I made sure he understood that if he regained the Fever as a result of the test that we couldn't do the dilithium treatment again. His body is still weakened from the exposure in the first place. I've filled him with stuff to try and combat that, but it will take at least a week for even *his* body to respond favorably to it."

"And he said . . ." Kirk prompted.

"He didn't say anything. He got a little redder in the face, like he does when he's getting upset, and picked me up and put my face next to his. Then he seemed to have second thoughts and smiled as he put me down. I think the smile scared me more," McCoy shook his head to free it from the image.

"At any rate he patted my clothes back into place and then turned around and left without a word. After my legs stabilized, I did a little search with the monitoring system and found him in the general sick area. He was tending to the sick even though I knew he was still running fever eight degrees over his norm!"

Kirk raised an eyebrow. "I know. I know, I should have got him back in his special suite and gave him hell. But ended up

watching for a few minutes. He's a natural born leader. He had the whole place taking his orders in a couple of hours. Now everything's organized to a 'T'. And he'd been exposed to the Fever again to the max. I gave him another five hours for the disease to strengthen in his body.

Then I cornered him in the mess and made him go to his cube and ran every test I could think of. He knew what I was doing to and just smiled at me the whole time. Everything turned up negative and he actually chortled at me when I told him. He insisted I inject him with the blood of an infected man because he knew it was the final test and the next logical one at any rate.

"I hooked up every scanner I had so I could watch the progress of the disease. But when I injected him, the new virus never got two inches in his body before it was consumed by the anti-virus he had developed from the dilithium exposure! It was like the stuff was swarming there to stop the new virus!

"Then he actually laughed, because even though his body was still racked with the Flu, the Fever couldn't even get a toehold in his body. I told him to stay put and that I would be back for more tests later. But when I got back to my office I checked, and he was back with the sick people. He's not doing any harm. And since he doesn't carry both diseases, I don't really see why he couldn't come in the rest of the ship. I know you guys could use another watch officer and he would be happy to chip in."

Kirk nodded to himself. Tarl was a fantastic individual. He would be in any culture - not just the Orions. Kirk hit the ship-wide intercom. "Tarl. Report to the bridge."

A few minutes later, the turbolift doors opened and Tarl strode into the bridge and stopped by Kirk's chair.

"Reporting as ordered, Captain," Tarl rumbled.

Kirk just kept looking ahead and ignoring Tarl completely, his face showing the battle that was raging within him. Finally, he spoke without looking at Tarl. "Disobeying your physician's orders. Disobeying the ship-wide restriction separating you from you shipmates for disease reasons. Blatantly using your power to reorganize the lower decks and causing those transportees to follow you and disregard their leaders."

Kirk finally looked over at the huge man that glanced between Kirk and the Doctor with a much humbler attitude. Kirk extended his hand quickly and Tarl actually flinched. Kirk smiled. “Welcome back, shipmate.”

And Tarl caught on quick enough. He grasped Kirk’s hand as he threw back his head and the relieved laughter rumbled loud and long. He finally looked at Kirk. “I am so glad to be back.” Then he turned serious. “What have you decided to do about the disease and the people on ship here?”

“Thanks to you, we have a positive plan now. We could never subject anyone else to the radiation that you were exposed to. That alone would kill half of them. But the planet the facility is located on has tons of dilithium lying around. Evidently, enough to effect a cure on all those people we left there.

“When we arrive, you will be in charge of the offload and setup of personnel. I noticed a lot of Klingon construction material sitting around. I want you to set the new, sick people up and assign some of the well people to take care of them.” Tarl was nodding as he listened and then broke in.

“I can use the remainder of the cured people to build new barracks for the next load of sick people.”

McCoy waved both hands. “Hello! How about a nice vaccine that doesn’t make people leave their homes!?”

Kirk and Tarl looked at each other and said almost at the same time, “NO!” Then they laughed, and McCoy smiled with them. “You haven’t got that vaccine done yet, Bones?” McCoy shook his head and wandered out talking to the ceiling.

Kirk looked up from the work he was doing at his desk. “Enter.” The door opened, and a very tired McCoy came in with a small vial and plunked it on Kirk’s desk. It looked to be a standard medical vial with a barely tan fluid filling it. But McCoy had tied a dark red ribbon around the tube with a carefully tied bow. Kirk examined it for a moment and then looked at McCoy. “Bones. You shouldn’t have.”

McCoy ignored his comment and pointed at the gaudily wrapped vial. “I give you your vaccine. Guaranteed to cure Orions, Klingons and even humans!” McCoy could see the

question and answered it before it was spoken. “I had twelve Orion volunteers. It took four hours to work on Captain K’Lanth. And Sulu had developed a cold, so it took him six hours to get better. They are all cured. No trace of the original disease and only the mutated vaccine form in all of them.”

McCoy held up a finger, reached out and propped Kirk’s elbow on the desk with his hand pointing up. Then he picked up the vial, carefully slipped off the ribbon and managed to stick the ribbon between two of Kirk’s fingers. He pulled a dispenser from his pocket, slipped the vial in it and held it up. “Your turn, Mr. Kirk.”

Two days later they reached the facility planet and picked up the people stranded there, removing their supplies as well. At warp six they were back at the home planet in three days. The off load of all the people took another four days. Distribution of the new vaccine started the first day back. The day the Orion Council was planning the celebration, the distress call came in from the Orion ship that Uhura had gone to.

While the council deliberated and decided what to do, Kirk gathered his command crew and beamed aboard. The ship had been restocked as the people had been downloaded so they were ready to go. Kirk wasted no time. They had a meeting on the bridge.

Kirk started and stopped. The command crew was in front of him and that was everyone on the ship, but the turbolift indicated someone was coming to the bridge. The others soon realized, and Chekov and Sulu palmed their phasers, moved to either side of the turbolift doors and waited. Scotty unobtrusively laid his hand on the turbolift override. Kirk nodded as the turbolift stopped and the doors opened.

Tarl stepped out with a big smile on his face and then froze as his peripheral vision picked up the men on either side with weapons drawn and slightly extended. He looked at Kirk. “Was it something I said?” he rumbled plaintively.

“Tarl!” Kirk moved forward and extended his hand. “I didn’t know anyone was onboard except these humans,” Kirk said as he indicated the rest of the command crew. “Are you well enough

to be jaunting around?" Kirk asked solicitously. McCoy took his cue from that but bided his time.

"I am here. I am ready to work. I heard about the distress call and I knew I could be of some help," Tarl rumbled.

McCoy saw his opening and jumped in. "Lucky you did. The first thing I was going to suggest at this meeting was to do a ship-wide decontamination before we met the other ship. You would have been caught in the gasses and radiation if we didn't know you were out there."

Tarl quickly picked up on the implications. "I am a contamination. I have the Flu myself even though the Fever is long gone. How could I have missed that?"

"Probably because that huge hulk you call a body couldn't be slowed down by anything as common as the Flu," Sulu threw in. Chekov laughed as they both put away their phasers. Everyone drifted back to their normal positions but Tarl who still stood by the turbolift doors. Kirk looked back over at him. "What's wrong? Are you alright?" He glanced over at McCoy. "Doctor!"

McCoy was already moving to Tarl's side. "Lean against the wall if you're dizzy. Any spots in your vision?" He laid a hand on Tarl's massive arm as he started to pull it out.

Tarl jerked at the contact. He was essentially a stand-on-your-own person and not used to people caring about him. He chuckled and patted the Doctor's hand. "I'm alright, Doctor. I was just considering my problem." He stopped a moment. "Well, actually our problem." He looked ruefully at Kirk. "I have thrust myself upon you and am some of the contamination you were determined not to spread."

Kirk thought for a moment. "That's only if the other ship doesn't have the Flu already. If they do, then your disease won't make any difference to them." He turned to Sulu, but Sulu already had hands moving over his boards. Sulu pointed at him. "This is James Kirk, Captain of the starship Terror. We are in moving toward your location in answer to your distress call. What is the nature of your problem?"

There was a moment of silence and Kirk looked at Sulu, but he checked his boards and shook his head, so Kirk knew it wasn't the communications that was done. There must be a real

problem at the other end that they needed to think about their answer to a rescue hail.

An answer finally came although it was a little hesitant. “This is . . .” And then a little more strongly. “This is the Starship Avenger. Midshipman trainee Slarth speaking.”

Kirk tried to suppress the shock of having a Midshipman trainee respond. He could see from the looks on the faces of his crew that they wondered what was happening on that ship. “Who is in command of your ship?”

The hesitation was even longer this time. “I am, Sir.” Then there was silence again as if he had said it all and could offer nothing further. Actually, Kirk imagined, he was scared at such an admission. Essentially the ship had to be sitting there defenseless.

“I repeat. What is the nature of your distress?” Kirk prompted again.

The hesitation was near as long this time, although it still didn’t answer Kirk’s question. “Is this really Captain Kirk of the Terror? I’ve heard so much about you, sir. Your ship is . . . “

“Midshipman! What is your ship’s problem?” Kirk barked.

“I have . . . have the report compiled here, sir,” came the hesitant reply.

“Transmit it now!” Kirk barked again. There was no response but the comm board lit up with the incoming report. Considering the compression and speed, it was a long report. “Report received. Stand by.” He pointed as he spoke to the front screen and Sulu put the report up there.

Kirk almost groaned as he read through page after heartbreaking page. The detail was exacting and daunting. They were dead in space. No power aside from emergency lighting and air. And one phaser. Evidently their last phaser shot had destroyed the other ship. The phaser bank was almost powerless as well. The engineering section had major damage with extensive external damage as well. It was a floating hulk. Kirk shook his head. Scotty did too.

Kirk scrolled back and noted that there were twenty-six survivors. “Avenger. We will be in your location in . . .” he glanced at Sulu who punched up the information on his chair arm monitor,

". . . twelve hours. Kirk out." He caught the shocked expression on Tarl's face. "Did you know them well?"

"I . . . I hand-picked almost the entire crew. They were the best I could find! If a Midshipman trainee is in charge, then they must all be gone. Two hundred and twenty-five men. Now twenty-six. Almost two hundred men gone. Two hundred good men!" He finally focused on Kirk. "Who did this, Jim? Who did this!?"

Kirk shrugged. "Normally, in this space, I'd say they were closest to the Federation. But the indications from the logs are that they couldn't identify their attackers. I'd say they would recognize the Federation if they had attacked them."

Tarl nodded his massive head as he rumbled, "True. But then, who could it have been? That ship was very similar to this one. Who would have knowledge enough to almost defeat a ship of this caliber? To inflict this much damage?"

"We will determine that. I can think of only one other possibility if not a strange race we haven't heard of yet." Kirk mulled over this for a moment and Sulu filled in.

"Romulans!" he blurted into the conversation.

Kirk nodded. "They are the closest. But even then, they'd have to be lost to come that far into Federation space. I can't imagine what would prompt the Romulans from knowingly coming so far."

They thought about it for a few moments. "Sulu. How long at Maximum warp?"

Sulu punched in the figures and turned to Kirk. "One hour, twenty minutes."

Kirk looked at Scotty. "I'll get down below, so we can get there quickly. I'll let you know, Captain," Scotty commented as he headed for the turbolift.

Tarl came to life. "I am still a contaminant, Captain."

"As a choice between death and the Flu, I think they'd choose the Flu," Chekov commented.

Kirk nodded. "No longer a problem now. We will naturally try to keep them isolated when they come aboard so we can question them more thoroughly. But you'll be part of the rescue team, so we may as well plan on them getting the Flu. "Kirk

sighed. “At least we won’t have to go through the decontamination. You have enough space in sickbay, Bones?”

McCoy nodded. “Yes. We’ll use the two adjuncts. No problem.”

Sulu’s board lit up and Scott’s voice came from engineering. “Warp ready, Captain.” Kirk nodded and Sulu punched some buttons. “One hour, Captain,” Sulu computed after going to warp seven.

“Gentlemen, make all preps for taking on those survivors. McCoy, you’ll be making the calls once we arrive. One hour.”

When the others had gone, McCoy turned to Kirk. “You realize that’s the ship Uhura was on.”

Kirk closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them. “I know, Bones. It was my first thought when we got the news. She knew what she was getting into.” Kirk paused. “I’ll mourn her,” he said quietly. “And when we find the bastards that did this, I’ll kill them all,” he said in such a quiet, flat voice that McCoy just nodded and then left the bridge. He was one of the few that knew what had gone on between Kirk and Uhura many years ago.

Chapter Nineteen
"The Final Nexus"

Kirk sat in the chair with the command crew back on the bridge. Tarl had taken his place as science officer. "Shields up."

Chekov pressed buttons. "Shields up, sir."

"Phasers and photon torpedoes on standby," Kirk recited smoothly.

Chekov punched more buttons. "Phasers and photon torpedoes on standby, sir."

Kirk nodded grimly. "Alright, gentlemen. Sulu. I want to go sublight at one hundred thousand miles. Be prepared to stop." He shifted to Tarl. "Full scan at maximum range. I know we're going to find Avenger. I want to see what else may be there." Kirk took a breath and glanced at McCoy who held up two crossed fingers. Kirk nodded and then said, "Execute."

A full fifteen seconds later, the front screen blurred and locked on showing the Avenger as a bright green dot. Tarl spoke from the science station. "Full scan, starting now." And brief seconds later, "Avenger appears as she has been described. The only other object of note is a small planet, one light year away. There is a large gaseous cloud still dispersing from what must have been Avenger's attacker's last location."

The pause was longer now. "Definitely a starship destructed. High levels of dilithium and another metal." Tarl looked up. "It was a Romulan warbird. The debris is conclusive." Everyone's jaw tightened at that. "Starting a second scan. Scanning for Dimethylene radiation." Tarl looked up at Kirk. "The Romulans don't realize it, but when their warbirds are cloaked, they put out a definite Dimethylene signature. We never explained it to them. Just blew them to space dust."

Tarl went back to his viewer and minutes later reported. "Three scans, Captain. All clear."

Kirk nodded. "Sulu. Get us closer to the Avenger so we can have a visual of her damage." The ship slowly came closer and then they stopped. Sulu automatically increased magnification so the Avenger filled the screen. All of them

winced. Scott got busy with his own scans. Kirk watched him and finally Scotty looked up,

"She's nay but scrap now, Captain. They have one impulse engine providing emergency power. And from the fluctuations that may fail at any time."

Kirk nodded because that assessment pretty much matched what he could see. The classic and beautiful lines had been destroyed by huge missing chunks and deep, piercing holes. "Get us closer so we don't lose anyone to a transporter glitch. Tarl, take Sulu and get them out under McCoy's guidance. And let's do it fast, gentlemen. I don't like it this close to that much destruction."

When the three had left for the transporter, Kirk continued. "I've never seen damage that bad on a hull with life still aboard. Pavel keep a continuous long-range scan running. I don't want anyone sneaking up on us." Chekov nodded. "And security around the sickbay area will be tight when they're aboard. No sense in taking chances at this time."

Kirk thought for a moment and then shared a look with Scott. "There's not enough left of her power plant to destroy her, Captain." Scott thought for a moment and shook his head. "I could rig thermal charges."

"What do you think would be best," Kirk asked quietly.

Scott was quick to come back. "Slingshot her into the nearest sun."

Kirk nodded as he thought about it. "Get a hook into whatever computer equipment they may have operating. They must have something running the emergency power. Then download everything of value. We'll trust the sun to take care of the rest."

When the survivors had been beamed over and were in sickbay, Kirk and Tarl beamed over and toured the parts of the ship that they could get to. Scotty manned the transporter and stayed on his station in case something went wrong. The damage was incredible and Kirk and Tarl were reduced to just pointing as things were discovered. Kirk was big on learning from other's mistakes. If mistakes had been made here, he wanted to learn.

Scotty meanwhile kept track of Kirk and Tarl by tracking their life signs. While he waited, he systematically searched the entire ship for life signs. He had already found four and Kirk and Tarl had examined the first two and extracted the mangled bodies of Orion crew. Both had died before they could reach sickbay.

"Kirk to Scott. Ready to beam to the third location," Kirk indicated.

"Scott, aye. But I'll have to beam just you. It's pretty cramped there."

"Just send me then, Mr. Scott. Beam Tarl to the fourth location." Kirk commanded.

"Ye'd better crouch down."

Kirk found himself in a very cramped space. It was a crew sleeping room and the bulkhead had buckled, driving the ceiling down. He examined the bunk and saw nothing. He tried his small scanner and was rewarded with a signal from the next room, which, he could finally understand from the twisted configuration, was the bathroom. He removed three pieces by main force and had a little more room but still had to phaser out a section before he could even get to the door.

Whoever was in there had been trapped for three days. Kirk tugged at the recalcitrant door and finally managed to get it to open. He used his light to look, once he had the door pried open, and found himself looking into the illuminated business end of a phaser. He froze and offered, "I'm here to rescue you." The combination of the voice and the next words caused him to almost drop the light.

"Where's your sword and white steed?"

He juggled the light for a moment and then could see behind the phaser as it was lowered. "Uhura!" He started to take her in his arms and stopped. "Are you alright?"

"No damage that I can tell," she answered quickly.

Kirk wrapped her in his arms and held her for a very long moment. He started to kiss her and stopped. She grabbed his head and pulled him into the kiss. A long and very heartfelt kiss. The meager illumination of the small light he held was forgotten until they were both illuminated by the transporter beam.

Tarl materialized bent over but his light was twice as big as Kirk's and illuminated them all. "Need any help with that mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Captain?" he rumbled innocently. Kirk and Uhura backed away from each other. Uhura gestured at Tarl, "I thought you'd already got rid of the dead weight."

Tarl laughed and held up his communicator. "Mr. Scott. Three to beam back to the transporter room." He casually ripped out what remained of the door and forced it behind him. "I've never been to your room before."

Scott quickly checked his readings as three figures materialized laughing. When the beam was done though, he was around the console in seconds. "Uhura!" he beamed as he hugged her tight.

"Scotty. Get her down to sickbay to be checked out. Tarl. Put her down." Some decorum established, he hurried Scotty on his way. Tarl casually wandered out of the transporter room whistling to himself. It took Kirk a moment to remember the lively tune and then he flushed remembering the popular lyrics. He sighed, shook his head and followed. He knew he wasn't going to hear the end of this for a long while.

Three days later they unloaded the survivors and were getting things back in shape when Tarl buzzed Kirk's door. "Enter," Kirk answered distractedly but then saw it was Tarl and turned his attention to him. "So what brings my first officer to see me today?"

Tarl looked very uncomfortable and Kirk immediately wondered what had shook his sturdy first officer so much. Kirk invited him to sit and Tarl glanced at the chair and nodded as he gingerly sat. The chair held and Tarl and Kirk relaxed a bit, but Kirk could still see that something had upset the Orion.

"Is it something about the ship,?" Kirk prompted.

Tarl looked up at him a moment and then shook his massive head. "No. The ship is fine. Everything is on track." But then he fell into silence again. Kirk waited a moment and then prompted again.

"Is it about your assignment on Orion?" Kirk waited and Tarl finally nodded.

But before Kirk could speak, Tarl stopped him. “My assignment has changed.” He hesitated and then groaned. “Or rather grown. I have a new assignment as well as my old one. But this one takes precedence.” Tarl threw his arm out and then drew it back self-consciously. “And I don’t know how to do this one.”

Kirk put a hand on the massive shoulder until Tarl looked up. “Then we shall have to attack it together.” Kirk paused. “My friend. . .”

Tarl immediately looked relieved so Kirk sat back and waited. “I have been put in a very delicate and untenable position.” Kirk nodded. “I am to be a . . . diplomat.” Tarl said with more than a touch of bad taste in his mouth. Kirk smiled and Tarl noticed. “I see they have made you a diplomat at some time in the past.”

Kirk laughed. “That they have. Of course, I had the best of both worlds.”

Tarl looked at him hopefully. “How is that?”

“I was a diplomat with a starship to back up what I said. The people I was talking to seemed to see things my way pretty quickly.” Kirk laughed again.

“The situation is a little different with me,” Tarl mumbled.

“Alright. Let’s start from the beginning. Who are you supposed to represent?”

Kirk radiated a confidence that Tarl didn’t feel but he answered anyway. “I represent the Orion People.” Kirk shook his head.

“No. You mean you represent a group of the Orions,” Kirk prompted again.

Tarl was a little surer of himself. “No. I represent all the Orion people.” Kirk quirked a brow at that so Tarl clarified. “I am to speak for all Orions and our government as well.”

Kirk cocked his head in question. That was quite a statement. “Then, who is it that you will be visiting; the Federation? To represent your entire people, you must be visiting someone very important.”

Tarl almost laughed and Kirk brightened a bit. “Someone very important to the Orion people. But not the Federation. Or the Klingons. Or the Romulans.”

Kirk was puzzled. To be representing his whole people and government, he had to be talking to someone very powerful on their own. But he had already denied to three big boys in Kirk’s reckoning. Kirk decided to keep it light. “Okay. You’ve discovered another power that is on a par with those others?”

“It was by accident almost two years ago,” Tarl nodded.

Kirk thought quickly. Two years ago. That was slightly before he joined them. But he had never seen anything about another race. Especially not as powerful as Tarl was talking about. Unless they had kept the contact a secret. But which direction did they come from? The Orions were surrounded by the Federation and the Klingons. One part of the Klingon space was rather thin and next to the Romulans.

Tarl saw his confusion and was sorry for the deception he was playing on Kirk. He patted Kirk’s shoulder and rumbled, “Let me explain with a little story.” Kirk nodded. Tarl took a minute and then continued.

“About thirty years ago, a decision was made by the Orion Council. There had been much dissent and the people were unhappy and the Council was undecided what to do. Then they had a new face enter their midst. A dynamic figure of such charisma and such a smooth way of talking that he had the whole council working with him in whatever he wanted to do.

“His name is not important now. Indeed, his name has been removed from the roles and is forbidden to be spoken in Orion society at any level. He was evil, but insidious evil. More so because he believed in what he was preaching. He was quite a remarkable person, but he had no practical experience at what actually made things work. Only ideas.

“He spent our resources on projects that he felt would better the Orion people. But someone must pay when the resources run dry. He was long gone before it finally became imperative to start rebuilding our resources. He was only cursed later. In this time of the people demanding more and more,

because he had given them everything, there came a time when the resources ran out. There was no place else to turn.

"Then one day, a starship from Q'onos came into our Empire. We had seen a few before and dreaded their arrival because they always wreaked havoc wherever they went. But this ship was just drifting. After a few weeks, we sent a shuttle and boarded it. Everyone was dead. They jettisoned the crew and brought the ship back.

"It was better than anything we had ever seen before. But better than the new knowledge it brought to us was the hold where we found the plunder they had stolen from other conquests. It gave a small boost to our coffers and we were able to operate but more carefully than before.

"We manned the ship and relabeled everything. At the first encounter, the Klingon ship we met thought we were Klingon as well. Since the ship was just like ours, we had learned enough to be able to disable it instead of destroying it. We boarded and killed them all. There was even more plunder aboard this one. We not only had a boost to our economy. We had another ship.

"It was a small step to doing the plundering of the peoples we met instead of trying to capture another Klingon ship. The Empire began to thrive again. But we thrived as an Empire of thieves. Our reputation spread and that is how we are known today. It is very hard to turn from that type of organization once you have made the jump. We couldn't get back to being a self-supporting and worthy society again, even though many of us wanted to be. The road back seemed too rocky for anyone to be willing to try it."

Kirk handed Tarl a glass of water and Tarl finished it at a draught. He nodded his thanks and thought long before continuing. Kirk was content to wait. "The Empire is in a bad way. We have learned little in the last years except to steal from others. It is our way of life and we have no other.

"On the smaller worlds they have systems of bartering and working for a common goal that is peculiar to them. But they have learned to hide it all from the marauders when they come around. Consequently, we had to go further and further afield to get just

basic sustenance from our plundering of others. Until we began to encroach on the area patrolled by the Klingons.

"We were told in the most basic terms to stay within our own territory. They didn't want anything we had because we had plundered our own people so efficiently there was nothing left for them. They just made sure we stayed in our own playground, so to speak. Forcefully, if necessary.

"When we started into the Federation's realm, they moved us back even faster. Left with our own barren territory, we learned to produce enough to get by on. We still plundered as we could but almost always with ships that had gone astray within our Empire. We were careful not to take too much from the Klingons though."

Tarl stopped for a few minutes and Kirk just sat waiting. He had long ago turned on the busy signal at his desk to stop intrusions from the comm unit or the door. Tarl seemed to grow uneasy again and Kirk got him another drink, which Tarl thanked him for and then swallowed quickly. He played with the glass for a moment, realized what he was doing and set it on the table before clasping his hands before him on his lap and continuing.

"This is the most difficult part," Tarl muttered.

"I wish I could say it gets easier." Kirk commiserated. "But many times, I had rather go into battle than continue."

Tarl nodded. "Myself also. There is something clean about a hard-fought battle."

"Perhaps you could talk to this entity the same way you are talking to me. It is much easier to speak to a friend than a potential enemy."

"Yes," Tarl nodded. "That is so. It is why I was chosen for this task."

Kirk frowned. "You are a friend to this entity?" They had paid particular attention to Tarl because he was so perfect for an exec job, which made him perfect for many other jobs. He had not been in communication with anyone else Kirk was sure. "He is still your friend?"

Tarl took a deep breath. "I certainly hope you are."

The silence was deafening. Tarl resolved not to say anything until Kirk did. Kirk was floored. He got himself a drink

and took his time finishing it. Finally, he sat and placed the glass on the table.

"ME!" Kirk gestured quizzically. "I am not powerful or very strong. My strength is my people. You are the diplomat to ME?" Tarl nodded. "But I have spoken to the council many times. Why could they not have called me to speak before them again? Why send a diplomat to me?"

Tarl took another deep breath. "Because within the members of the council there are two who want to go back to our old ways of robbing and plundering and they are powerful. The rest are a group of frightened old men who want things to be as they should be. They want to have an Empire that finds its place among other groups as a valuable member because they provide something. Not have their name be synonymous with fear. They are the ones that have appointed me."

Kirk paced the confines of his cabin for a few minutes. He finally stopped and stood before Tarl. "Why me? What would you have me do?"

"We don't know how to do this. We have had many meetings and there have been many ideas. But everything seems to get stopped somewhere along the line for one reason or another. You seem to think very clearly and have learned much. You have served in the Federation and fought the Klingons and Romulans. We think you would be our best hope of help in traveling this road."

Kirk stared at Tarl for a moment. "Those two men on the council. You know they will have to resign. You will have to make them go away so the council will be acting of one accord. It is the only way the Federation will deal."

"That is a big stopping point. Each man has been asked time and time again to resign. But both men have a network of thugs who work for them, who would carry on their work if they were harmed. They wield too much power and would be almost impossible to be clear out without some form of retribution."

Kirk nodded at this and paced awhile. He turned to Tarl and asked, "Do you trust me?"

"With my life and the future of my people," Tarl answered simply.

“Then go to your cabin and wait. You will have my answer in one hour. Please don’t contact anyone. Alright? Friend.”

Tarl extended his massive hand. “It shall be as you say.” They shook and Tarl left. Kirk called Sulu and Chekov and had them report to his cabin. Thirty minutes later an enthusiastic Sulu and Chekov knocked on Tarl’s cabin door. When Tarl opened it they went in and handed him a large sack. Tarl was puzzled but looked within and found twelve phasers.

“These are Federation issue. They are forbidden for transfer to non-Federation personnel,” Tarl said as he looked at the phasers.

When he looked up at them, Sulu and Chekov smiled back, and Sulu said, “It’s lucky we’re not in the Federation. I have a plan.”

The next morning, Kirk exited the turbolift on the bridge and found everyone there. Chekov piped up first. “Captain. Report finding a bag of twelve Federation phasers. There was no way to determine where they came from.”

Scotty chipped in, “Some were low on charge, so all have been recharged. I have given them back to Mr. Chekov.”

“All those phasers have been properly stowed, Captain.”

Kirk played along. “Securely, I hope, Mr. Security Officer?”

“Yes, sir!”

Kirk nodded. “Carry on.” Kirk looked over at Tarl. “First officer. To my cabin.” Kirk turned and left the bridge. Moments later he stood in his doorway as Tarl approached. “Good morning, Mr. Tarl. I trust you had an interesting evening?”

“Yes, Captain,” Tarl replied meekly. Kirk motioned him into his cabin, closed and secured the door and motioned to a seat. Tarl sat and watched as Kirk pulled an Orion jamming device from a drawer and activated it. Now he knew there would be no record of their conversation.

“Situation cleared up?” Kirk asked mildly.

Tarl nodded warily. “Yes, Captain. Tarl looked around the cabin again and then at the blocking device where the lights were twinkling merrily. “Permission to speak freely, Captain.” Kirk nodded. “Captain. Those guys are crazy!”

Kirk laughed. “I have heard that. I trust that everything turned out okay.”

Tarl straightened up in his seat a little to report. “I regret to say that the two council members refused to listen to reason. We approached them in council, as you had suggested, after researching and removing their networks of personnel. Even with the proof of the capture of their networks, they resisted listening to reason. Both drew weapons and I was forced to kill them.”

Kirk nodded. “I was afraid of that. That’s why I wanted them approached in council. I had hoped that they would see reason and resign with the pressure of seeing the other council members there. But since they resisted, I wanted that to be done in front of the council also, if it went that far.”

“The council consider themselves rescued since they were under pressure when we interfered for them. They were very grateful.” Tarl was quiet for a moment and Kirk let the silence draw out. “I believe I have completed the part I was assigned.” Tarl let that hang for a moment.

Kirk nodded. “And you want to know what I can do for you. I understand.” Kirk turned back to his desk and held still for a retinal scan and the opened a small drawer. He weighed the multi-page document in his hand and looked at Tarl again. “I take it you are still the ‘ambassador’. And that you still represent the council and your people?”

“That I do,” Tarl rumbled.

“Then this document was written for you to read,” Kirk said lightly as he handed the booklet to Tarl.

Tarl looked at Kirk a moment and then glanced at the document and then again. “Am I to understand that you speak for the Federation?”

“Yes. Yes, I do in this instance,” Kirk said quietly.

Tarl was confused. “But I did the research myself. I saw the documents separating you from Star Fleet. I saw the blocks they put on Federation jobs you applied for. I saw all of your applications for space jobs. I researched them thoroughly from the company rejecting you as well.” Tarl hesitated. Then with more confidence as he thought he understood, “You have just spoken to the Federation about this.”

Kirk stood and paced for a moment. He looked over at Tarl and commented, “Where’s a good old battle when you need one?”

Tarl looked confused for a moment but then made the connection to what they had talked about before. “You are an ambassador?” Kirk nodded slowly. “And you represent the Federation?” Tarl asked the key question. “You are the Federation representative to the Orion Empire?”

Kirk nodded and finally spoke. “I have been since yesterday.”

Tarl understood quickly. “When I presented my dilemma and asked for your help.”

“When you presented your credentials and your dilemma and asked for help,” Kirk corrected.

Tarl’s mouth opened in astonishment. “We are the diplomats for our cultures?”

Kirk nodded. “I have been waiting for you for over a year.”

“But the Orion ambassador to the Federation . . .” Tarl began.

“That pompous ass? He couldn’t represent himself. Much less his culture.” Kirk’s dislike was evident.

“But you have been to the council itself many times,” Tarl suggested.

“A council that wasn’t ready for change,” Kirk completed.

Tarl considered that and a great deal more. Kirk knew he was intelligent. “You have been here over a year. I don’t think you would have waited forever. How were you going to have the conditions you wanted?”

Kirk considered briefly. “Let me tell you a story as you told me one.” Tarl thought and then nodded. Kirk sat back and started. “Almost twenty years ago, the Orions made their first sally into Federation space. It took us almost a year to understand that the peace offerings we were making would always be refused and the Orions would continue to make incursions into our space for the purpose of destruction and looting.

“We stationed a star ship in the vicinity and waited. It didn’t take long. The Orions fought well. But they were destroyed.

The next ship they came in was a Klingon ship and we assumed it was Klingons and prepared for battle. I guess they fought harder expecting a fiercer foe. They destroyed that ship as well. The Orions appeared to mind the border that had been set. After the third incident, almost a year later, there were no more incursions.

"Then we discovered that there had been a series of raids. This was fifteen years later. The tactics were much different than before. We were unable to engage the new pirates. We doubled the presence we had there by stationing another starship. But that didn't do any good. The raids were very fast and seemed to anticipate when the starships would be somewhere else.

"We found out we had leaks and plugged them but ended up with more. It became another type of warfare and we steadily lost. Then they decided to do something about it. We couldn't protect the far-flung areas we had given our promise to protect.

"The problem was, we accepted trade with your people who came across the border. So, some Orion presence was accepted. But the Orion Empire refused any try we made to carry business to your Empire. Because of the basic difference in size, we were unable to infiltrate your territory.

"But the determination of the powers that be was going to prevail and they were preparing to mount a massive strike and wipe out all pirates in your territory. The loss of life would have been terrible on both sides. But after a great deal of discussion, the cooler heads prevailed, and we decided to get invited here. This was when a situation came up that had me going off like an idiot on my own. So, the plan was quickly made. You know the rest."

But Tarl was quicker than that. "You haven't answered my question yet. How were you going to get the conditions you wanted? Would you have used force?"

Kirk thought for a moment but then nodded. "I was to try diplomacy first. And if all else failed, I was to use force."

"You? Against the entire Orion Empire?" Tarl persisted.

Kirk laughed. "No." He shook his head. "Even I don't think I'm that much of a warrior." Tarl waited. Kirk nodded to himself,

reached out and opened a secure comm circuit. “This is Captain James T. Kirk. Calling Captain Richardson.”

The swirling screen on the comm unit coalesced into the picture of a Star Fleet Captain sitting on his bridge. “Richardson here. Got a date for us Jim?”

“Not yet, Carl. I’m still working diplomacy.” Kirk paused. “Do me a favor, Carl. Show me an external that shows the armada.”

“I can’t show you everything. You know we’re too spread out for that. How’s this?” And the screen changed again to show four Starships hanging in the dark of deep space. Tarl’s mouth hung open.

“Thanks, Carl. I’ll be getting back to you soon.”

“Sooner than another month, I hope!” Richardson shouted as he signed off.

Tarl finally managed to croak, “They have been standing by for a month?”

“I called them together when I first heard about the Fever hitting the Empire. I knew then that the combination of the Flu and the Fever was going to decimate your people. The armada was originally gathered to provide transportation and help with victims.”

“You would have helped us?” Tarl frowned in answer.

“All those ships you saw there are exploration vessels. They have armament because they run into some tricky situations. Ferrying people is one of their primary functions in case of disasters.” Kirk explained.

Tarl was thoughtful for a moment. “And, if need be, they would fight us.”

Kirk shook his head. “I am a Starship Captain. This ship we are on is the only real ship in your fleet. Aside from the one whose carcass we just dropped into a sun, this is the only real ship you’ve got. All those little spacecraft that flit around like crisneks would be useless in a real fight. They just don’t have any defense. If we were inclined to fight, I would have taken this ship about the time I got my old crew and wiped out your whole fleet!”

Kirk shook his head again. “Here I am talking about what I don’t want.”

Tarl looked at Kirk questioningly and hopefully. “What do you want James Kirk?”

Kirk looked up at Tarl and sighed. “What I always wanted. I want the Orions to be a happy people. Productive.” He smiled. “There are many things that I have seen on some of your worlds that would draw a good price in a Federation market.”

“Really? Anything particular come to mind?” Tarl asked.

“The carpets at Ulanda. The perfumes at Synk. The woodcraft at Myncal.” Kirk enumerated.

Tarl frowned in wonder. “People would pay money for these things?”

Kirk laughed. “I think I saw a painting of a warrior scene in your room when I visited you one day. Did you paint it?”

“No. It was in was in the market and I like it.” Tarl answered

“You are but one person. And you liked that picture. In the Federation, there are billions upon billions of people! Just myself, I know three people who would want it.”

“But could my people sell in your Federation?” Tarl wondered.

“Some of your people already are. But they don’t have to. With free trade in place, we have people from the Federation who would come where the goods are and buy them.” Kirk got up and paced. “There are so many possibilities out there. And your people would be free to sell to whoever they wanted.”

“But my people are not ready for that. They are innocent where most of the dealings with other people are concerned,” Tarl offered.

“As a friend of the Federation, the Federation, with your permission, would establish help centers on each world. These help centers have many functions. One is to act as an intermediate for problems of all sorts. Business disputes. Farming help. Ideas for raising better and healthier cattle. Many, many things.” Kirk explained.

“That would be a large organization. On each planet,” Tarl pointed out.

“The help center starts small. As the needs of the people are seen, they would import people and supplies to help. So it would grow, but only to meet the needs of the people,” Kirk said.

“And they would be visited often for provisions and such. A lot of space traffic for each world that has almost none now,” Tarl said.

“Actually, once the help office is provisioned, they rarely get another visit unless they request more items or personnel for help the people need. They live in houses in the local economy. And use local supplies and foods unless there are dangers in the food stuffs. Then they would have to be shipped in,” Kirk explained.

“There would be no local stores that sold Federation goods?” Tarl asked.

“Only if the people who lived there wanted one. They determine who moves in and who doesn’t. Each situation is different in a way. So, each would develop according to the planet and what they desire,” Kirk simplified.

Tarl laughed. “Are we negotiating?”

Kirk laughed as well. “I am explaining.” Kirk pointed at the document laying on the desk. “That would have all the terms of our friendship.”

“Then we would be a vassal of the Federation?” Tarl looked animated for a moment.

“No,” Kirk explained. “You would be a friend of the Federation. Completely autonomous in your actions and dealings. Read the document and then let’s talk again tomorrow.”

Tarl nodded and rose. “I like what I have heard, James. I hope we can be friends.”

“WE already are. Let’s hope the Federation fits into your life.” Kirk extended his hand and Tarl smiled as he shook it. Tarl picked up the paper and left.

The next day, Tarl left for the planet. After four days he was back and asked to see the Captain in his cabin. Kirk had him come down, they shook hands and Kirk put out drinks. When they were comfortable, Kirk asked, “How can I help?”

Tarl tossed the bound stack of paper on the table and sighed. “I have spoken to the council. After much debate, the

council has decided to reject your offer of friend of the Federation. After much discussion, they came up with a counter-offer."

Kirk's mouth turned down and then he brightened. "The friend deal is pretty good," he commented to try one more time.

"Three of the council members read this entire document," Tarl nudged the pages, "and decided that there was another status that you hadn't mentioned that offered more. We have decided that we want that or nothing."

Kirk's brain raced as he mentally examined his memory of the written pages. It was a standard writing of the friends of the Federation. He couldn't imagine what more they could want. Might as well find out. He was authorized to offer a certain amount in credits also. "So just what is it your people want, Tarl?

Tarl took a deep breath and sighed it out. He looked up at Kirk very seriously and said with solemnity, "The council of Orion and the people of Orion, who I represent, wish to apply for membership within the Federation."

Tarl was already looking at Kirk to gauge his reaction and Kirk's face lit up with a big smile. "Tarl! Congratulations!" Kirk offered his hand, and both smiled mightily as they shook on it. "You realize this may take a little while?"

A year later, the Federation's latest new ship, a copy of the old Enterprise, slipped into orbit around Orion. The ship entered parking orbit and the ensign secured the underway protocol and reported to the Captain, "In parking orbit, Captain."

Pavel Chekov turned from signing a fuel consumption report and responded, "Very well. Assume the in-port watch."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the quick response as hands danced across the board.

"Kirk, here," came the response when Chekov called because Kirk had been waiting, too.

"We are in standard orbit at Orion, Admiral," Chekov stated.

"Well done, Captain. I've been waiting for this a long time. I'll notify the Ambassador and meet you in the transporter room in ten minutes," Kirk proposed.

“Yes, sir.” Chekov closed the circuit and pointed at his Exec. “You shut things down. I’ll be in the transporter room.” Minutes later, Chekov had made a quick stop by his cabin and walked hurriedly into the transporter room. There he found McCoy also in his dress jacket and running a finger under the collar as if it was choking him.

“Need a larger size, Doctor?” Chekov queried.

McCoy grimaced. “I’m a Doctor, not a diplomat.” He fingered the stiff collar again. “I don’t need a larger size,” he whispered loudly, “I need someone to destroy this torture machine!”

Chekov chuckled; having spent a good part of his Captain’s bonus taking Jim Kirk’s advice and getting a really comfortable dress uniform. Chekov said in a low voice, “I think I know someone who can help.”

McCoy held up a hand. “Oh no you don’t. I saw the bill on that outfit you got.”

They both were laughing as Admiral Kirk walked in. “Congratulations, Captain. It’s the first time I’ve seen the good Doctor wearing that suit and laughing!” McCoy immediately grimaced and Kirk said, “That’s more like it.”

Before McCoy could reply, Montgomery Scott said from behind the transporter, “Three standing by to beam up, Captain.”

Chekov looked at Kirk who nodded and he replied to Scott, “Very well. Let’s not keep the Ambassador waiting.”

Scott shifted levers and three pillars of light coalesced on the transporter staging area. Quickly, they solidified to form three massive figures. The two on the front pads saluted with their ceremonial weapons and stood to the side facing each other, the one on the right glancing around the room as he moved, ready to attack if necessary. As he met the gaze of the figure on the left, the glare made him stand straighter and stare into space as he had been instructed.

When they had stood still for a moment, the largest figure of all moved forward smoothly in a graceful move that looked more like a prowl. He stepped down from the transporter staging area and stopped before Kirk. “Admiral,” he said slowly in more of a rumble than speech.

Kirk nodded his head and spoke also. “Ambassador.”

“May I present my assistant, Commander Gnall.”

Kirk turned slightly and nodded as the man on the left stepped down from the transporter staging area. The large man stood by his Ambassador and nodded in return, his bearing as regal as if he were the Ambassador.

The Ambassador glanced to his other side and almost sighed. “This is my bodyguard, Ensign Grith.” Grith almost jumped down with no grace and took a moment to stand straight next to his boss, more relaxed but still obviously in near attack mode. He did not return Kirk’s nod, probably not having even seen it

Kirk almost grinned and the Ambassador noticed but didn’t say anything. Kirk gestured to his left, “I think you’ve met Captain Chekov.” Both nodded formally at each other. Kirk gestured further left. “And Doctor McCoy.” McCoy nodded almost self-consciously. The Ambassador nodded. Kirk pointed behind the console. “And Captain Scott.” Both nodded solemnly.

The Ambassador looked around. “Is that everyone?”

Kirk nodded. “I believe it is.”

“Are we finished with the ceremony now?” the Ambassador almost begged.

Kirk almost smiled at the longing in the deep, bass rumbling. “I certainly am.”

The Ambassador turned to his assistant, nodded at his bodyguard and said “Gnall.” It was obvious that they had spoken of this before.

That worthy nodded and looked at the Ensign until that one realized everyone was waiting on him and looked at Gnall. Gnall bared his teeth as he said in a stage whisper that almost carried into the hall, “If you even move, I will kill you myself! Do you understand?”

The Ensign heard the threat as well as the words. He nodded once and stepped back. Gnall looked at him with a glare that had the Ensign fold his hands in his lap. A moment and then Gnall nodded at the Ambassador.

The Ambassador smiled and loosened his collar. “Thank Engas that’s over with.” Next was a near bellow as he opened his arms wide. “Jim!”

Kirk met him halfway and responded just as loudly, “Tarl, you old space dog!” They met and hugged with much pounding on the back. The Ensign took this in and barely held himself in check. But when Chekov, McCoy and Scott moved forward to join the greeting, making almost as much noise, his hand almost unconsciously moved to his weapon. He caught a movement from the corner of his eye, looked and saw Commander Gnall draw his weapon and point it at him. He froze, and the sweat stood out on his brow as he slowly moved back to having his hands in his lap. He was very confused. Perhaps this was a part of the ceremony he wasn’t familiar with.

Kirk had noted the exchange and moved to Gnall. “How are you commander? It is excellent to see that you have done so well.” Gnall faltered for a moment because he didn’t think Kirk would remember him. He threw a final glare at the ensign and fastened the snap on his weapon. He and Kirk grasped both hands and smiled. The Ensign was totally confused. Everyone had their hands on each other and he wasn’t even allowed to move!

Kirk spoke in a very low voice that didn’t carry. “His father is on the council, I take it.” Gnall rolled his eyes and nodded. “If he turns out half as good as you, his father won’t hold him back as yours didn’t hold you back. Being a council member’s son can’t be all bad.”

Gnall broke into a grin and then he and Kirk both laughed. “His father, Councilman Trank, is a very powerful advocate of the idea that a man, his son, should earn his position. That’s why he’s an Ensign. And that’s why he’s with us. His father is taller than me and forceful when he speaks. You’ve met him before.”

Kirk nodded, shook the large hand once more and then moved to the Ensign. “I understand your father is Councilman Trank.”

The Ensign had come to attention because he knew Kirk was the Admiral. Then he looked at Gnall and froze. Gnall pointed to his mouth, pointed at Kirk and then at the Ensign. The

Ensign understood and shifted back to Kirk. He was still confused but answered. “Yes, sir.”

Kirk smiled and placed a hand on the Ensign’s arm. The Ensign froze again at the contact. “Yes,” Kirk continued. “A good Orion and a strong member of the council.”

The Ensign looked warily at Kirk. “You know my father?”

Kirk nodded. “We met some time ago when I addressed the council. A tall man as I remember,” Kirk said as he noted that the Ensign was shorter than Gnall.

The Ensign nodded rapidly and almost smiled before he remembered Gnall, glanced that way and nodded again slowly. “I will be sure and mention that you remembered him.” Kirk patted the Ensign’s arm again and moved back to Tarl and the group around him. They had quieted considerably. “I understand they are refitting my old ship?” Kirk asked Tarl. But it was Gnall who started to answer then deferred to Tarl.

Tarl laughed. “Some idiot at the council had a Gorgon idea that we should have a strapping young Orion to run things on the new ship. We searched around but couldn’t find anyone we could trust so we just had to pick a left over from another assignment. And you know the first thing he did? He got rid of all those gravity controls!”

The earth crew laughed hesitantly except Kirk. He turned to Gnall and pounded him on the back as he shouted, “Congratulations!” The rest caught on and Gnall was congratulated again and again. The huge Orion actually flushed in his pleasure. He glanced at Tarl a few times but seemed to be tongue tied. Finally, he muttered to himself, “Where’s a good battle when you need it?”

Kirk and Tarl immediately laughed hard and then Tarl recovered and explained to the others, “Since I was the ‘idiot’ that recommended him, Gnall was just exercising some diplomacy and not calling me by name.”

Gnall was immediately bombarded with congrats again and Scott suggested that they retire to the mess area where a small reception had been set up. Once the potables began to flow, even the Ensign broke down and became real.

The next day, everyone was in full regalia again and the Federation contingent met with the Ambassador and the Orion Council. The council was big on ceremony but even they had enough after a couple of hours of speeches. Everyone moved from the council chambers to the reception room next door. Things degenerated rapidly after that.

Two weeks later, Chekov signaled the Admiral at his cabin door and was admitted. Kirk waved him to a chair and began. “I don’t have much time. I need four of your men.”

Chekov answered immediately, “Of course, Admiral. A particular department? Or just warm bodies?”

“A security detail. I’ve got to take off.” Kirk shook his head. “Actually, I’m going to get you to drop me off. Remember Penta-Mangare?”

“The Klingon base we used for a drop zone in the healing process was there,” Chekov summarized. “Drop you off? That’s in the neutral zone between Orion and Klingon space,” he stated. “I can’t just leave you there.”

Kirk waved it off. “Yes, you can.”

“I’ll wait for you,” Chekov said a little louder.

Kirk laughed. “You have eight planets to visit, people and equipment to drop off, help centers to setup. I think your time is well mapped out for you.”

“Гречиха!” Chekov said slipping into his native tongue in his excitement. Then he brightened a little. “I believe there are Starfleet regulations that detail how many people you must take with you. And how many of each. One medical. One communications tech and sufficient equipment to reach back to Starfleet.”

Kirk laughed because he had been in this position before. And because he recognized the speech and it showed Pavel was really concerned. His laugh interrupted Captain Chekov. “Really, sir. It’s true. There are rules and regulations!”

“I know.” Kirk got serious. “Believe me, I know.” Kirk started again. “But there are extenuating circumstances . . . “

“There are always circumstances where you are concerned,” Chekov reminded.

“Pavel! How can you say that?” Kirk put in. Chekov merely cocked his head and looked at him. Finally, Kirk dropped the hurt look he was trying and scooted forward on his seat to be closer and more confidential with Chekov. “Captain K’Lanth has contacted me personally on a secure channel and requested the meeting. I think there are problems in the Klingon Empire, he needs my help and he doesn’t know how to ask for it.”

Kirk paused for a moment. “He wouldn’t expect me to go in alone. But I can’t drag a whole slew of people in with me. That’s why I asked for four people.” Kirk sat back and looked at Pavel Chekov, his friend, and hoped he wouldn’t hear the answer from Captain Chekov.

Chekov was silent a long time and the internal battle was hard. Finally, he nodded and looked at Kirk. “Four security people. And they will be my best.” He held up a hand when Kirk would have said something. “And one person from sickbay. With a full kit.”

Kirk smiled. “Done! You had me talked into the doc from before after I thought about it. Wouldn’t want the whole meeting to be ruined by me having a version of the Chechnya two-step.” The reference to some of the fiercest and blood thirstiest fighters ever to come out of Russia made Chekov smile also.

“When are we due at Penta-Mangare?” Chekov asked.

“Two weeks. We have plenty of time, so he can sneak away from his own people.” Kirk lowered his voice to a mutter. “I hope he has better luck than I did.” Chekov turned at the door. “Just kidding. But there is one more thing.” Chekov raised a brow, not at all sure he would give in on this one. “Please don’t tell McCoy,” Kirk almost whispered. “Since he made Captain, he’s almost impossible!”

“Since he’s not the ship’s Doctor, that shouldn’t be a problem.” Chekov assured. “I will handle the assignments personally.” Chekov nodded and left, and Kirk sat back and relaxed before getting some sleep.

Chapter Twenty
"New Challenges"

Kirk sat in his cabin and fretted. The ensign had come and taken his bag down to the transporter room. He had everything packed. Chekov had assured him that he had made the assignments for his security team. Kirk took one last look around, nodded and left himself. He didn't know how long he'd be gone.

As he walked into the transporter room, Chekov was checking the security team personally. With his approval, they mounted the platform and Chekov nodded at the ensign behind the console. The group of four disappeared in dazzling pillars of light. The security team would beam down first to make sure the area was secure. After a few minutes they reported in. "All secure, Captain. This place is deserted."

Kirk had already noticed the young lieutenant that must be his medical person. He hoped she would prove proficient when they got down there. At least she was a lieutenant, so she must have some experience. From the looks of the large bag she had by her, she would have everything she would possibly need. But just as Kirk was about to speak to her, there was a commotion in the hallway that he could hear through the door. Everyone looked over.

Kirk's head lowered and he shook it as he recognized the voice raised in anger. "You'd better open that door now, Ensign!" He must have been answered because McCoy continued. "Then suffer the consequences of dealing with a Doctor!" Kirk sighed as he distinctly heard a body slide down outside against the closed door. A moment later, the door opened, and Leonard McCoy stepped over the body of the ensign and spoke to the lieutenant. "Revive that man," he commanded.

McCoy turned to Kirk, dropped his little bag on the floor and put his hands on his hips. Kirk looked at him and said mildly, "Bones." He looked over at the lieutenant as she gave the ensign a shot and the ensign sat up and coughed. He swung back to McCoy. "Siglin?" he asked, and McCoy nodded. Kirk eyed the

small bag at McCoy's feet and commented, "Glad you could make it."

"Kind of short notice," McCoy came back and picked up his bag.

"There was a reason for that," Kirk said.

"I'm all ears," McCoy shot back.

Kirk shrugged and moved to the staging area. He caught the lieutenant's eye, pointed to her bag and the transporter pod next to his. Then he turned to McCoy and smiled. "You weren't invited."

The lieutenant froze in the act of picking up the bag. The transporter operator suddenly got very busy with his console. Chekov merely dropped his head into his hand and shook his head. McCoy didn't notice them.

"Does that mean I can't go?" he asked softly.

Kirk shook his head. "It's sort of a sensitive mission. Kind of secret. I don't know how long it will last. I wasn't sure a Starfleet Doctor, much less a full Captain, would be able to get away for an unspecified time. Just thinking of you, Bones."

McCoy looked at him a moment and then sidled closer and glanced at the others before looking Kirk in the eye. He spoke in a low tone, not intended to carry beyond them. "Have a heart, Jim. This Captain stuff is for the birds. It's not my ship, so I can't say anything about the sickbay. Which is being run super well. If I go back to Starfleet, they'll put me in an office and I'll never see space again."

Kirk remembered his office back on earth that he had referred to as his cage. He answered in the same low tone. "Are you free?" McCoy nodded. Kirk turned to Chekov. "Would you make a note in that Journal that we are keeping that Captain Leonard McCoy was asked to accompany the Admiral as a consultant on this mission and accepted?" Kirk raised a brow at McCoy and he nodded and stood straighter.

"Was there anything else you needed to bring since we may be gone so long?" Kirk asked softly.

McCoy thought and then nodded. "I did forget that one bag I keep in my closet on the floor," McCoy directed at the lieutenant.

“May I get that bag for you, Doctor?” the lieutenant recovered quickly. McCoy knew that she had the medical security code which would get her in the room and nodded his thanks. The wait was a short one and the lieutenant was back with a rather worn blue bag that had obviously seen many landings.

They took their places on the transporter stage and Kirk glanced down at McCoy’s worn blue bag and idly brushed at imaginary dust on his uniform sleeve as he looked back into the air above everyone, which made it appear as if his nose was turned up. McCoy’s face grew red and Chekov pointed to the console operator and quickly said, “Energize!”

The group turned into sparkling bands of energy as McCoy’s voice could be heard saying, “Now just a danged minute, Jim!” Thankfully, the transport was complete before he could continue. Chekov sighed loudly, turned and left the room.

On the planet, McCoy picked up his two bags and continued complaining to Kirk. “You know I’ve had that bag for ages, Jim.”

“I just was thinking that a Starfleet Captain could afford a new bag,” Kirk shrugged. Then he grew more animated. “Tell you what. I’ll get you a new bag once we get back to earth.”

McCoy brightened for a minute and then frowned. “But there’s no telling how long that’s going to be.”

Kirk shrugged again. “There is that. Give you something to look forward to.” He turned to the security leader, “Set us up in one of the old offices. Should be one in this building. I’m not sure how many will be in the other landing party.”

“Yes, sir,” the security officer said and motioned to one of his men. Within half an hour their office was set up and Kirk pulled a special comm device from his bag and set it on the table. Setting it up he tuned it to a special frequency and muttered to himself, “Now we wait.”

But the wait wasn’t very long. Just four hours later, a weak voice came through the unit. Kirk immediately bent and answered. “Kirk here.”

“K’Lanth here. I will arrive in one hour. Is everything secure?” came the weak voice again.

“All secure here. Kirk out.”

McCoy chimed in, “He sounds very weak, Jim.”

“I hope it’s his comm unit that needs a boost,” Kirk commented.

When the sleek one-man shuttle landed a half-hour later, they found out that wasn’t the case. K’Lanth made it down the ladder and collapsed on the ground. McCoy was to him quickly. A quick scan and McCoy motioned to the security team. “Get him in the spare bedroom.” They quickly picked him up and carried him inside. McCoy stooped by Kirk for a brief moment. “Preliminary shows his temp’s way out of sight. Looks like fluids are low. I still have to determine what it is. But it isn’t good.”

Kirk nodded and followed the scurrying McCoy. An hour later, McCoy joined Kirk in his room. “The good news is we’ve got him stabilized. The bad news is it’s the Fever. If they’ve got any treatment for it, he hasn’t had it. Natta’s still pumping fluids in him. He should be conscious in a little bit.”

McCoy was as good as his word. They had no sooner entered the room than K’Lanth groaned and fought his way up to a sitting position. He stared around groggily and then focused on them. “Kirk!” McCoy easily pushed him back down and motioned for the lieutenant to administer more fluids. Kirk came over to the bed and laid a hand on K’Lanth’s arm. He was burning up.

Kirk turned to McCoy. “Can’t you bring his fever down?”

“Fluids first. Then his own body will be helping regulate his temperature. Right now, I’m surprised he surfaced at all. Be another hour.”

They were in Kirk’s office when the lieutenant knocked on the open door sometime later. “Excuse me, Admiral. The Klingon is awake and asking for you.”

“Very well, lieutenant.” Kirk answered as he got up and put away his com unit. He stopped by K’Lanth’s bed and laid his hand on his arm again. He was much cooler and felt the hand. He opened his eyes and focused on Kirk.

“The klin has left me Kirk. I think I’m dying.” He managed to speak a little.

“No dying today in my sickbay,” McCoy cut in.

Kirk patted his arm. “Did you come all this way to die then, K’Lanth?”

K’Lanth struggled to sit and Kirk helped him up. “A warrior should stand when he talks.” Kirk helped steady him as he stood and leaned against the bed. “I was much impressed with your medicine the last time we met, Kirk.”

“We have one of the best with us now. Captain McCoy,” Kirk reminded.

“Yes. The Doctor who helped my representative from the council.” K’Lanth breathed deeply for a moment. “He offers his thanks, Doctor,” he directed at McCoy who nodded in response. K’Lanth turned back to Kirk. “I need help again.” He glanced at McCoy. “I need you both.” He staggered for a moment but recovered. “I must finish. We discovered that the Flu is a result of a Romulan plot.”

“Romulans!” Kirk exclaimed.

“Yes. They infected four people in different parts of the Empire.” K’Lanth fell back and Kirk helped him into the bed.

“You must rest now,” Kirk calmed.

K’Lanth struggled to stay awake. “You must hide the landing craft! You must hide . .” K’Lanth passed out and the lieutenant was at his side. Kirk motioned to the security guard.

“That’s a good idea. Get that shuttle under cover and police up a little so it looks as though no one has been here for years,” Kirk directed.

“Yes, sir,” the guard answered and left.

Later that night they realized they had done the right thing and just how close the enemy was. Just after midnight, Kirk was awakened by being almost shaken from his bunk. He rapidly threw on his clothes and went investigating. The security guard in the hallway stopped him.

“The building next door has been bombarded,” the guard told him as he stood with his weapon at the ready.

“Who?” Kirk softly asked.

“We think Romulans, sir. We heard some subspace chatter before the explosion and Carter knows a good bit of Klingon and couldn’t figure anything out. Johnson knows a little

Romulan and said he recognized a few words," the guard finished.

"Our subspace radio," Kirk questioned.

"All radio and transmitting gear of any kind shut down immediately per your orders, sir," the guard answered.

Kirk nodded as he thought a moment. "Why that building next door? Were we just lucky?"

"We think it was the antenna array. We used the array because it was already in place and we wouldn't have to erect anything," the guard speculated.

"Good thinking," Kirk nodded.

They were joined by a second guard with a deep space scanner. "They phasered the building next door, Admiral, and then left orbit. I checked with the doc and everything there is okay." Kirk nodded and went back to bed.

The next morning, he was over to see K'Lanth, letting him know what had happened last night as far as they could determine. He was much better and able to sit up by himself. "They grow bolder as the Empire loses the ability to defend itself." McCoy came in just then. "That last medicine you gave me worked well, Doctor. My fever appears to have gone down and I retain fluids better. I only feel like I have been run over by a small shuttle now." McCoy laughed.

The Klingon Captain turned back to Kirk. "The Empire is rapidly being overcome by the Flu. Our people are more and more debilitated, and more and more resources are being used to take care of them." McCoy took that time to run a lengthy scan on him and he held still.

When McCoy chuckled as he put his device away, Kirk looked at him. "What did you find, Doctor?"

McCoy looked up happily as the patted the cover of his scanner back in place. "It's what I didn't find, Admiral." McCoy almost danced in place. "Lieutenant Natta suggested adding iridium to the vaccine we had developed for the Flu in Orions. Iridium seems to play a big part in Klingon medicine. Anyway, it worked! According to that last scan, his body is completely free of the virus!"

K’Lanth surged up but then fell back when McCoy put a hand on his shoulder and pushed. “I didn’t say you were well! I said the virus is gone. You still have to recover.”

“But the vaccine! My people!” K’Lanth breathed deeply for a moment. “I will buy this vaccine.”

McCoy shook his head. “Not for sale.”

“Not . . . But my people!” K’Lanth cried.

Kirk continued, “You will be the savior of your people. You are cured. And I’m going to send you back with the formula.”

“You would do this? For the Klingon Empire?” K’Lanth asked incredulously. Kirk just smiled and nodded. McCoy nodded too. K’Lanth fell back unconscious. Three days later, he stood by the shuttle with Kirk, prepared to leave. “I am sorry to say I cannot guarantee what will happen now, Kirk.”

“What happens between the Klingon Empire and the Federation will just have to happen.” Kirk smiled. “But I hope the Klingons will outfit some ships with well men and take care of the Romulans!”

“Of this you can be sure.” They clasped hands and K’Lanth climbed in the shuttle. As soon as Kirk was inside he blasted off.

Kirk watched him leave and then made preparations for his own departure and return to the Federation. He muttered to himself at the inevitability of continued problems between the Klingons and the Federation. “Que sera, sera.”