
Where No Man Has Gone Before
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Phred Jones
Grok

"Where No One Has Gone . . . "

By Phred Jones

Where No Man Has Gone Before
Published 2020
By Trekkie Fan Fiction
Edited by Sean O'Keefe

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Chapter One

James T. Kirk froze in the act of stretching mightily and groaned. McCoy stopped the forkful of ham and grits on its way to his mouth and chortled as only the unaffected can, "That'll teach you to listen to your doctor when he tells you you're too OLD to try these new dances!" The load on the fork disappeared.

Kirk grinned ruefully as he lowered his arms and gingerly twisted his neck to loosen the tense muscles. "But it was fun, Bones. I haven't danced like that since Rachel Stone and I won the contest at the "

Kirk broke off as Spock joined them with his tray of sustenance materials. Damned if he could grace two bone-dry selinius grain slices of bread, a few wilted green leaves and a large container of beta-carotene with the name of breakfast. He shuddered and winced again as strained muscles complained.

"Was that Doctor Stone you were speaking of Captain?"

Kirk glanced at Spock. Trust him to key on Rachel's new job as civilian advisory to Star Fleet. He nodded as he rose from the table, "Yes, Spock. Quite a lovely lady and talented too." He picked up his tray and continued to McCoy, "Sorry to eat and run, Bones, but I have that meeting at ten hundred with the Drasulian ambassador and I want to go through that greeting again."

McCoy pushed back his tray and picked up his coffee. "Drasulian? The greeting that looks like you're climbing through a porthole two sizes too small?" When Kirk nodded, McCoy continued, "Why don't you stop by sickbay and see Lieutenant Miller. Explain what's wrong and she'll fix you up."

Kirk's brows furrowed in thought. "Lieutenant Miller? New?"

McCoy sipped and then nodded. "Came aboard at Star Base 6 last week." Spock paused as he saw Kirk's eyebrow raise and peripherally caught the doctor's head shake. Kirk nodded and moved to the recycler.

Spock finished the last of his beta-carotene and put the container on his empty tray. His agile mind took only a moment to assess the captain's unasked question and McCoy's unspoken response. He glanced at McCoy and raised an eyebrow of his own.

McCoy, flustered at being caught, rose quickly and paused as he picked up his tray. His mouth opened twice but no words came out and he turned away, muttering to himself, "Damned sharp-eyed Vulcan doesn't need all that beta-carotene."

Spock watched McCoy hurry from the officer's lounge and then rose

himself. He was due on the bridge in 8.6 minutes and wished to consult the sociology section of the sciences computer to catalog this latest encounter with human behavior before assuming his duties.

Kirk slipped through the opening doors into sickbay and glanced around. Nurse Chapel was not at her desk but he heard some talking in the next room and walked quietly that way. As he got closer, he could make out gentle feminine laughter and some quiet words spoken firmly.

"C'mon, Christine. Hold still while I adjust this thing."

He peeked around the edge of the door and stopped as he saw Nurse Chapel sitting on the diagnostic bed with a strange harness half in place across her back. What gave him pause was the beautiful woman trying to adjust the harness.

The woman had her back to him but he could see piles of deep auburn hair held in a Star Fleet regulation hairdo. A slender neck flared down to small shoulders and a lithe body that hinted of feminine curves. Very feminine curves, he reassessed as she turned slightly to reach a strap.

Athletic legs tucked neatly into Star Fleet boots.

Nurse Chapel laughed again and shifted away from the questing fingers over her rib cage. The other woman sighed in exasperation as the buckle slipped from her fingers again. Kirk suddenly realized his position in the doorway looked like spying and hastily backed out before they turned and caught him. He moved quickly to the desk by the door and picked up and dropped a datapad.

The laughter from the next room cut off abruptly and a moment later Chapel appeared with the harness still half hooked and the other woman behind her. "Captain. Can I help you, sir?"

Kirk looked up from the datapad and took them both in quickly. "Yes, nurse. Doctor McCoy suggested I use the services of one of our new specialists."

"Ah, yes. The dancing ills." Christine's eyes lit up and Kirk's narrowed. That was last night! How in the world had she heard about it already? He was sure McCoy hadn't been down here yet. A quick glance showed him that the new lieutenant wasn't aware of what was going on but was distressed at Chapel's familiarity.

"Yes. A little stiffness."

"Then Lieutenant Miller here has just the cure I'm sure." Chapel deftly unhooked the remaining straps and handed the harness to Miller who

took it with a question in her eyes. Chapel looked at him but spoke for her benefit.

"We were just examining the differences between this Star Fleet model of a similar harness she has worked with for years." She half turned to look at Miller, "Reminds you of the old Messinger restraint, doesn't it Jackie."

He caught the look of instant comprehension in Miller's eyes. She hefted the harness with authority and motioned to the treatment room, "Right this way, Captain." He moved to the open door, giving Chapel's smirk an 'I'll talk to you later' look as he passed and seated himself on the treatment table.

Miller moved around him and quickly and easily fastened the harness to his chest and back. As she tightened the straps, his shoulders were forced back and slightly up. He almost groaned but caught himself. She guided him to lie on his stomach and applied two pads to his back over the sore areas.

"Just lay quietly, Captain. This should only take ten minutes." She flipped some switches and the nagging ache slowly slipped away. "I'll be right back, sir."

He heard her leave and could barely make out the murmur of Chapel's voice over the hum of the equipment. Kirk had no trouble hearing the rich, half-stifled laughter. He grimaced and tuned them out.

Spock rose from the command chair and stood at its side as Kirk exited the turbolift and stepped spritely down the stairs. He caught the last of Spock's raised eyebrow as he turned for the update.

"We are presently cruising at Warp 4 on heading 335 mark three en route to the Zamerian star system and the planet Drasule. Estimating arrival in 29.73 hours."

"Barring an ion storm . . . "

"I have taken the detour for the ion storm into account." "... or a supernova . . . "

"No star within 117.2 light years is scheduled for impending supernova status for one year." "... or OTHER unaccounted data!"

Spock took his hands from behind his back and turned to Kirk. Kirk's smile broke through before Spock could phrase his question. Spock nodded and turned to the front view screen that showed a slowly changing vista of dozens of stars.

"I am encouraged to see that Nurse Miller was able to take care of your 'ills', Captain."

Kirk's smile slipped and his head turned quickly to Spock. Spock

slowly turned his head to face Kirk and then slowly raised one eyebrow. Kirk's mouth opened but before he could speak, Spock continued, "With your permission, Captain. I have 2.65 hours of research to complete on my sociology paper to the Vulcan Institute and I must obtain information in sickbay before I can continue."

Kirk's brow furrowed and then cleared. "Sociology. Yes, of course. Chekov can fill in and I'll know where you are in case one of those OTHER unaccounted data come by."

As the doors closed behind Spock, Kirk punched the button on his chair arm for sickbay. "McCoy here."

"Bones. What is Spock's sociology paper on?" "'MATING RITUALS OF THE POST-30 HUMAN MALE'. Why, Jim. Trying to get a spot in it?" "No. No, of course not."

"Too late. You already made it!" The click of the switch cut off McCoy's braying laugh.

Kirk started to call McCoy back and thought better of it. His hand dropped from the button. IN it?

McCoy paused outside Recroom three and smiled as he recognized the last verse of the lively Russian song Uhura was singing and Chekov was accompanying on his balalaika. He slipped through the open door and caught Christine's eye as Chekov began to explain that Russia was the birthplace of the old style blues music, also.

Chris rose from her seat and stopped to gently push Jackie back down. "Probably only a request for some information. You stay here and enjoy. You've been working pretty hard these past two weeks making the transition to a fleet vessel."

Jackie started to protest but Uhura had gently caught at her arm. "Please stay, Jackie. This is only the second time you've joined us and we'd like to get to know you better." Uhura released her arm and Jackie slowly sat and watched Chris exit with Doctor McCoy.

She swung back to Uhura as the communications officer smiled and continued, "Do you play an instrument?" Jackie immediately thought of her violin but shook her head. "I played when I was younger, but I doubt you even have a violin on board. Not very many people take it up anymore."

Uhura frowned in thought for a moment and looked around the three quarters filled room. Her eyes lit up as she spotted Ensign Douglas from engineering. She got his attention and waved him over.

With long practice Jackie assessed him as Uhura spoke. Young, bright and eager. Probably a top student and anxious to be part of the crew.

A puppy dog. She was almost compelled to return his quick grin.

"Don't you have a violin, Frank?"

His eyes rolled back in his head as he laughed, "I don't believe it! I've only been practicing for a week and already I'm famous!"

Uhura's throaty laugh joined the others as Chekov commented, "Famous? Yes. Sulu is convinced that you are responsible for his Singuin fire plant shriveling up after you practiced in the arboretum."

Jackie had to laugh at the quick change in Douglas' face. "I'm sorry, ensign. I only commented that I used to play the violin." The bright smile was back and Jackie caught the sudden interest in his eyes.

"Could you show me a few things?" At her thoughtful look and quick nod, he turned and was off like a shot.

Jackie turned to Uhura in some confusion. "He's gone to get it." Jackie sat up sharply and glanced quickly about her at the myriad faces, mostly unknown.

"Uhura!," she whispered frantically, "I haven't played in YEARS!"

Uhura gently disengaged the hand that clutched at her sleeve and held it in both of hers. "Jackie? I have many friends aboard the ENTERPRISE. Would you be my friend also?" Jackie calmed down a little and nodded. "Then please call me Nyota."

Jackie nodded and then smiled as she returned the grip. "Thank you, Nyota."

Their attention was drawn to the door as Ensign Douglas rebounded off the side in his haste to return quickly. "Does he live in the hall? ," Jackie remarked at his quick return.

Nyota grinned quickly. "No. But he's not hurrying back to ME." She broke into a throaty laugh at the sudden comprehension in Jackie's wide eyes.

Jackie glanced at the nearby table where Douglas was undoing the case and preparing to withdraw the violin and turned back to Uhura. "But he's just a kid, Nyota!"

Uhura gently patted the hand now clutching hers and lightly disengaged it. "Then you better raise him right, . . . Mom." Both women laughed and turned back to the approaching ensign. Jackie relaxed with the familiar situation. Many of her patients had wanted to pursue her amorously. Be considerate but firm and leave no room for misinterpretation. She was sure she could turn him delicately away like the others.

She accepted the instrument from him and smiled at the obvious care he had bestowed on it. Even though it had been years, her fingers moved over the wood and strings, adjusting the bridge, testing the tension and finally plucking lightly as she tuned it carefully.

She set the violin on her shoulder and grimaced as her jaw came down on the top. She could feel the familiar irritation at her neck and knew she would soon develop a "hickie" again if she played very much. She sighed as she accepted the proffered bow.

A few moments of fine tuning and she found herself tentatively playing the centerpiece from the All City Orchestra concert back in Flint. She was the youngest then, but now allowed her added years to force her to relax and let the music carry her away. There were a few awkward moments but the piece did come out remarkably well.

She finished the last note and lay the bow in her lap and drew down the violin. She was struck by the complete silence in the rec. room. Some of the faces were still lost in the sweet rhythms of the music.

Ensign Douglas' face was stretched in awe, "So THAT's what it's supposed to sound like." She joined in the quick laughter that broke the mood. The group quickly clamored for more and she sighed as she picked up the instrument again. She thought for a moment and broke into the lively tempo of a more popular piece. Soon many had joined in by clapping in time with the fiddling. She laughed again, really relaxing for the first time since she had come on the starship.

Chapter Two

The morning shift was just taking the turnover reports from the off-going team when Kirk entered the bridge. He had not had time to make a round when Uhura turned from Communications, "We are being hailed on a sub-space channel, Captain."

Kirk glanced at Spock as he straightened from his hooded viewer. "Small personal craft, Captain, bearing 231 mark two. No apparent armament."

Kirk moved to the command chair and slowly sat. You didn't often encounter small craft this far out from the galactic center. "Status verified, Captain," Chekov chimed in. "Federation registry shows this ship as the 'Johnny D'. Class three drive and no weapons."

"Thank you Mr. Chekov." And then over his shoulder, "On screen, Lt. Uhura." Class three drive? There weren't too many habitable planets in this sector it could be coming from. He looked over to Spock who was now standing by his side with his hands behind his back.

"Danvia Five is marginally habitable. It is the only planet within range of the craft. Only other possible origination is the Tantalus Penal Colony." Kirk swung back forward as the main view screen changed.

The first outstanding impression was of purple. Light purple walls and darker purple seats in the cramped bridge of the approaching craft. Even the instrument lights seemed to be purple. On closer inspection, the large canine appearing animal was a stuffed representation.

The human in the adjoining seat looked to be somewhat battered. He finally spoke, "Thank God I've found someone."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship ENTERPRISE. May we be of assistance?"

"Captain Kirk. Assistance? Yes. Please!" "You are far off the normal routes Mr. "

"Westgate. Charles Westgate. I had just left the Tantalus colony when I was set upon by a madman that had secretly beamed aboard. A large, hairy humanoid. He forced me to take a heading directly away from the inhabited portion of that sector. It was only after he had the opportunity to calm down that I was able to show him that we were going in the wrong direction and were running dangerously low on fuel and consumables."

Kirk caught Spock's nod as Westgate's story substantiated his conjectures. "And so he made you leave him and the remaining food on Danvia Five?"

Westgate seemed startled. "Yes. I didn't think I had enough fuel to

return to Tantalus, so I headed in this direction to try and get close enough to occupied Federation territory to be able to reach someone by sub-space."

"We will rendezvous with you in . . . "

"18.6 minutes at this warp," Spock murmured. "... about twenty minutes."

"Thank you, Captain." The screen shifted back to normal space as Kirk shifted back in his command chair again.

"Incoming sub-space from the Tantalus colony, Captain."

"On screen, Lieutenant." Uhura's hands danced over the Com panel and Simon Van Gelder, the director of the Tantalus colony, appeared on the screen.

"Good day, Captain Kirk." "Good day to you, sir." "I just received word that your ship was in this sector, Captain. I'm afraid I have a request for assistance to make."

"To recover your lost inmate?"

Van Gelder's brow furrowed as he replied, "Did Star Fleet advise you of my request? I just broke communications with them before I attempted to reach you."

"No, sir. Star Fleet has not apprised us of your situation. Although, I'm sure they will. We have found out that your escapee is on Danvia Five."

Van Gelder's ruddy complexion seemed to grow darker. "His name is Zarn, Captain. He managed to avoid taking his medication for three cycles. He is extremely dangerous because of both his animal cunning and great strength. He will not be taken easily."

"I understand, Doctor. We will keep you advised of our progress. Kirk out." As Van Gelder's florid features faded to the star-strewn dark of deep space, Kirk turned to Spock. "Prepare a landing party for our arrival at Danvia Five, Mr. Spock."

Spock nodded and headed for the science station. Kirk swung to the helm. "After we rendezvous and take Mr. Westgate aboard, set course for Danvia Five, Mr. Sulu. Warp three." Kirk nodded at Sulu's crisp acknowledgment and swiveled to communications. "Lt. Uhura. Mr. Spock and I will be in the shuttle bay." He nodded at her response and rose for the turbolift. Spock moved around the upper deck to the lift and met him.

As the lift sped off toward the shuttle bay, Kirk casually asked Spock, "Finish the landing party list?"

Spock nodded as he replied, "Indeed, Captain. Mr. Thompson will be in charge with ten of her security crew. Lt. Miller was at the top of the

duty roster for medical and will accompany them as medical backup."

"I didn't hear the Captain's name in there."

Spock paused, mentally taking a deep breath, and continued to examine the lift control panel as he replied. "In this type of mission it is Star Fleet's recommendation that a variety of competent personnel be assigned to the landing party to ensure its success and give the participants the opportunity to grow in command experience."

Kirk sighed. "In other words, use the people you have that can do the job and let them learn a little in the process." At Spock's nod, he continued, "I understand Star Fleet's regulations, Spock. I just hate to send my people into a dangerous situation alone."

The lift stopped and Spock stopped just outside the door sensor range allowing it to continue in operation. Kirk stopped also and turned to him. "Would you consider Captain Garovic a good commander, Captain?"

Kirk's mind flashed back to his first ship's captain and he slowly nodded, "An excellent commander, Spock."

"And yet, he seemed willing to trust a certain young lieutenant with control of his landing party on a number of occasions." Spock's eyebrow rose in silent question.

Kirk studied his face for a moment and then nodded again, "Point taken, Mr. Spock." They continued to the shuttle bay and had to wait a few moments for the area to repressurize. McCoy and Lt. Miller joined them as they waited.

"Uhura said this gentleman might need some medical attention."

"He did look a little battered, Bones." Kirk looked to Lt. Miller, started to speak and then stopped and looked over at Spock, whose eyebrow immediately rose. Kirk continued to eye Spock and spoke to her, "Lieutenant."

Miller looked in confusion from Kirk to Spock, who stared stolidly at the shuttle bay control panel, and finally to McCoy who was snickering to himself as he watched the two of them.

Spock commented just as the panel began softly pinging, "I believe the repressurization is complete, Captain."

Kirk reluctantly looked away and punched in the access code. As the doors parted he purposely looked at the lieutenant and smiled and then moved into the shuttle bay.

They stopped in front of the vehicle and Miller peered in its large recrystallized view panel. She caught sight of the large stuffed dog strapped

in the co-pilot's seat and gasped as she realized the entire interior was purple!

In her eagerness to see the pilot emerging from the side panel, she failed to note the interest of her three colleagues. The pilot was about twenty years old and slender and she had already started to back away when his bruised features coalesced into recognition.

"Don . . . ?"

He stopped in front of her and smiled. "My father.

And you are undoubtedly Jackie Boot.

I'd recognize you anywhere from the pictures." "Do you know Lieutenant Miller, Mr. Westgate?"

"Miller?" His eyes quickly searched her face again and he smiled. "Married. To be expected." He turned to Kirk, "No, Captain, I have never had the pleasure of meeting this lady."

Kirk obviously wanted to ask more but McCoy spoke first, "Why don't I take Mr. Westgate to sickbay to patch him up a bit and deliver him later for your questions?"

Kirk head cocked slightly toward Spock and Spock murmured, "1.27 hours, Captain." "That sounds like a good idea, Bones. Conference room 2 in half an hour?"

"Yes, sir. I'll have him there. Lieutenant, please escort our patient to sickbay."

"Yes, sir," she replied and led the way. Westgate was talking animatedly before they cleared the doors. McCoy was following closely, soaking up every word. Kirk and Spock watched as Scotty's efficient crew swarmed over the small craft readying it for space again.

Kirk sat back from the viewer and sighed. Danvia Five was a class M planet. But surface temperatures varied from -45 to 0 Celsius. "Marginally habitable, Spock?"

"There are no indigenous intelligent life forms, Captain. But the survey showed a number of hot springs which could provide needed basic life support."

"Will we have trouble locating this Zarn?"

"We have the coordinates from Mr. Westgate's computer log. Sensors should be able to pinpoint his location. The landing party will be outfitted with class three cold weather gear after our briefing."

Kirk's attention shifted to the doors as Security Chief Thompson brought her people in for the briefing. They had barely seated themselves when the doors opened again to admit the trio from sickbay. Kirk indicated the chair at his left for Mr. Westgate.

"I trust our medical department was able to take care of you, Mr. Westgate."

"Yes, Captain. Most excellent care. Doctor McCoy helped me in putting through a message for my company to apprise them of what had happened and how soon I would be returning. The last was a little unclear."

"Mr. Scott, my chief engineer, has seen to the refueling and reoutfitting of your ship, Mr. Westgate. We will be making a short stop at Danvia Five to capture the escapee from Tantalus Colony and then be arriving at Tantalus shortly after that. You are welcome to stay with us until that time."

"That would be most satisfactory, Captain. Thank you."

Kirk turned the meeting over to Spock who briefed the team on the planetary conditions. Kirk shifted uncomfortably in his chair through the planning by Thompson and the disbursement of the team for preparations. Spock and McCoy stayed after the rest had left.

"What's the matter, Jim? You've been fidgeting for the last ten minutes."

Kirk shifted again and twisted his neck as if feeling for something wrong, "I don't know, Bones. I just have a bad feeling about this whole detour to Danvia Five."

Three groups formed in the transporter room.

Thompson and her security people were donning the last of their survival gear and checking each other's ties and equipment. Scotty was pointing out some anomaly in the transporter to his trainee. And Christine Chapel was helping Jackie get bundled up. Spock was standing to one side and observing each group in turn.

"Looks like you have everything in the right place, Jackie," Christine commented as she tucked in a loose strap end. "Have you been in much cold weather before?"

"I lived in Flint, Michigan. Their winters were pretty fierce sometimes. But as for dressing correctly, there's another reason for that Chris." At Chapel's curious look she continued, her voice pitched lower, "'Cause I'm smarter than the average bear."

Both women started as Spock commented from behind the lieutenant, "I fail to see the significance of the relative intelligence factors of an ursine creature and yourself, Lieutenant Miller."

Jackie's face flushed and she opened her mouth to speak but bit off her words as she recognized the voice. Chris patted a pocket into shape and replied for her, "She was probably thinking of the bear's natural fur and

winter habit of hibernation, Mr. Spock."

Spock was silent as Chapel turned Miller around and gave her a gentle shove to the transporter platform where Thompson's team was already assembling. "But a bear does not consciously prepare for cold weather by dressing, nurse."

"Yes. There is that," Christine commented as she waved slightly to Miller, standing on the transporter pad clutching the medical kit to her protectively, and walked out the door. Spock stood quietly for a moment and then placed the whole encounter in the portion of his mind reserved for human behavior that required further study.

In moments they had all beamed down and Spock left for the bridge to report to the Captain.

Chapter Three

The howling, driving wind nearly took her breath away. Nestling the tricorder within the protective arch of her arms, she fought her way around the huddled group of security personnel. The tricorder's whine was lost in the wind but saw the telltale indications when the humanoid life was detected.

When she worked her way through the group to Thompson, she saw her look sharply at her and reach above her head. Suddenly the wind was gone from her half-frozen features, protected by a clear plastic she had swung down from within her parka hood. She grimaced as her face began tingling with the increased warmth.

She also became aware of the slight crackle in her ear and then Thompson's words, "Sorry, Jackie. Should have thought you'd not be familiar with the parkas."

She patted her arm gratefully, "Glad you thought of it then. This is just a little worse than winters back in Flint." She shifted hands with the tricorder to adjust her face piece and brought it up for her to see. "127 mark one."

She nodded. "Perez, take Mahler and Smith. Jones, get Mitchell and Wilson. The rest of you follow McGuire. Search pattern A-6. Move out." She held Jackie's arm a moment and then pointed in the directions his team were leaving. She nodded and raised the tricorder and quickly made adjustments with her heavily padded fingers to alter the team's indications on the screen. Finally she nodded at Thompson and they turned into the wind, following the advance groups on either side of them.

Kirk paced the small area between the communications console and Spock's figure hunched over the science station. He stopped for the tenth time next to Spock who responded to Kirk's silent question without straightening, "They have cleared the edge of the storm, Captain. Temperatures are still approximately -12 degrees Celsius."

Kirk spun without a word and stalked to Uhura. "Still monitoring, Captain. The tricorder is showing echoes that have to be examined before they can safely pass the position."

Kirk glanced up at the turbolift as the doors slid open and McCoy ambled onto the bridge. Kirk straightened and moved between the rails into the command section and sat in the command chair as McCoy stopped beside him. But even seated he was unable to keep still.

"What's the matter, Jim? I've never seen you so keyed up over a

landing party before." Kirk stared into McCoy's anxious gaze for a moment and then shook his head irritably, "I'm not sure what it is, Bones. I know Thompson is competent and I trust her judgment." He paused and twisted again in the chair, "I just have this nagging feeling that something bad is going to happen."

"And you won't be able to do anything about it up here, right?" Kirk nodded sharply. "Why not send Spock down to lend his assistance? There may be some transitory need for logic." McCoy smirked over his shoulder at Spock who had just looked up.

"The doctor's idea has merit, Captain." McCoy looked slightly surprised. "I could lead an auxiliary team to assist in eliminating some of the sensor ghosts, speeding up the search by a factor of 26."

Kirk's eyes flicked angrily between Spock and McCoy. "And thereby keeping the Captain on the ship a little longer." He raised a hand as McCoy opened his mouth to speak, "I agree, gentlemen. No need to gang up on me. Take twelve from security, Spock, and coordinate with Thompson when you reach the surface."

He quickly rose and moved to stand in front of Spock as he headed for the lift. "I'll give you one hour, Spock. In one hour, I'M beaming down." Spock eyed his determined features and nodded silently. Kirk moved aside and Spock continued below.

Kirk pulled up short as he entered the transporter room a little over an hour later. McCoy, lounging against the console and speaking with Scotty, turned to face him. "Seemed like a good idea to have an addition medical presence with so many personnel on the surface." McCoy gestured to the transporter pads with his medical kit.

Kirk took in his heavy weather outfit and adjusted two straps. McCoy grinned back at Scotty and joined Jim on the pads. "Energize."

Kirk materialized in a crouch. His drawn phaser swung in a short arc as McCoy's tricorder found the large group of ENTERPRISE people. The tricorder's whine was loud in the sharp, biting cold. There was no wind, for which McCoy was grateful. He noted that Kirk had shifted his parka's mask up and shook his head as he pointed out the direction of the main group.

Ten minutes of following the Captain's eager lead brought both of them to Spock's location. "We have eliminated all but three locations, Captain. One is just ahead in that cave behind the windbreak. Mr. Thompson is moving in on the other two with the main group."

Kirk nodded and pointed to a large tree to their left. "McCoy and I

will station ourselves there to block that escape route. Let's flush him out and get away from this place Mr. Spock."

He walked quickly away even before Spock could acknowledge. McCoy shook his head at Spock's questioning look and followed more slowly.

As Kirk moved under the tree, there was a shout from one of the security men and Kirk was bathed in the green haze of a phaser blast. He fell instantly. McCoy hurried to his side as the security team rushed the position on the hill.

The tricorder whined as McCoy ran the sensor over Kirk's inert form. McCoy grunted to himself, unfastened Kirk's parka and withdrew a hypo from his kit. He had just administered the combined tri-ox and stimulant when he heard a sound behind him.

Before he could turn, a huge paw sliced through the air and caught him in the side, throwing him through the air and into the trunk of the tree. His head struck sharply and he lay still. The beast ambled to him cautiously and pawed him for a moment before it was satisfied that he posed no threat.

Kirk's body reacted to the chemicals and he cried out as he sat up groggily. The beast, which was defending it's young in the tree above, flew into a rage at this new danger and leaped across the interval, attacking Kirk as he struggled to clear his head.

His efforts to fend off the beast's attack only infuriated it further and it began biting and clawing at his unprotected body. Kirk was helpless in its grasp. The tough material of his parka flew in pieces as the taste of blood caused the beast to bite harder and rip deeper.

Suddenly a prolonged phaser strike bathed them both and the beast fell beside Kirk. McCoy struggled back to consciousness and over to Kirk. He groaned at the exposed internal organs and the copious bleeding that soaked into the tattered parka and the surrounding snow. He reached for his kit even as he heard Spock behind him.

"ENTERPRISE. This is Spock. Medical emergency. Emergency medical team to the transporter room. Three to beam up." He replaced his communicator as he bent and gently scooped up Kirk's ravaged body. McCoy stood and continued to minister to Kirk as the transporter beam enveloped them.

Spock saw to the placement of the escaped criminal, Zarn, in the maximum security cell and stopped on the bridge to lay in a course for the Tantalus colony. He arrived in sickbay just as McCoy came out of surgery. The doctor's tear stained face spoke more eloquently than the gown drenched with blood.

McCoy dropped into the chair behind his desk and looked up at Spock. "I can't save him, Spock. There's just too much nerve damage with the failing organs. I have him stabilized but he'll just get weaker and weaker."

Spock's usually blank expression drained to bleakness as McCoy's words sunk in. "Are there no facilities which could give him a chance, doctor?"

McCoy shook his head and then stopped. "Perhaps on Earth. Some of the experimental procedures may be able to restore some function and keep him alive. But he'll never live that long, Spock. With the facilities we have on board we can keep him alive for another twenty-four hours. "

McCoy hung his head, "His back is broken in two places. Even if we can get his body to accept the loss of his spleen, 90% of his liver, one kidney and his pancreas, he'll still be paralyzed from the shoulders down."

"Would the facilities at the Tantalus colony be better, doctor?"

McCoy brightened perceptibly. "Yes! With their research facilities I could keep him alive long enough to patch him up for the trip back to Earth."

Spock nodded somberly. "May I visit him now?"

McCoy motioned as he rose, "Yes. Please do. I'll begin preparations for our arrival at the colony."

Almost an hour later, he looked up as an exhausted Spock left Jim's bedside and walked out the door. He went to the bed and read the diagnostics, nodding to himself at the improved conditions. Spock's ability to mind meld with Kirk always had a positive influence. McCoy nodded to himself again and hurried back to complete his preparations.

Spock threaded his way from the colony's transporter room to the recovery room and lab facilities McCoy had commandeered for Kirk's recovery. McCoy turned to him as he entered, his eyes growing wary at the look he saw on Spock's face.

"It must be bad news, Spock. Let's have it."

Spock paused and McCoy shook his head. "Star Fleet has just informed me that the Klingons occupied Gamma Beta Seven in violation of the Organian Treaty. They departed after infecting the population with Rigillean Fever. The infection was deemed inadvertent, the result of contact between one of their crew who had the disease and some of the natives who had never had the opportunity to develop antibodies."

"But that planet's four days away at high warp!" "4.24 days at warp

six."

"I can't leave Jim alone for the two weeks it will take to get that situation under control!" "Your presence is specifically required by Star Fleet regulations and by order of Admiral Komach when he spoke with me."

"But Spock. Its Jim! I can't just leave him!"

Spock's face grew even more stony. "You have no choice, doctor." McCoy stiffened in anger. "We have no choice," he finished in a hollow tone, and McCoy could see the struggle within Spock. McCoy could not bring himself to speak. "I'll have Nurse Chapel beam down so you can brief her." McCoy just nodded and turned away.

Eight hours later Chapel patted McCoy's arm and spoke to him softly. "I know you hate this Leonard. But Jackie and I will keep him balanced and exercised. Laura Miller, from the station staff, has already begun some of the cloning techniques we were investigating. We'll all be looking out for him."

McCoy lay his hand gently on Kirk's good shoulder. "You follow your doctor's and nurses' advice and I'll have you back climbing those Serita Mountains outside Tucson; Spud Rock and Baboqui . . . whatever. We'll even stop again in Vail at that little gin mill you found." His voice broke and died.

McCoy swiped at the tears and turned away. "I know it's the right thing, Chris. But I'd rather be here with him." He straightened slightly. "We'll have this thing whipped in no time and I'll be back." Chris smiled sadly to herself as he walked away.

Back in the recovery room, she stopped to watch Laura extract a tissue sample from the Captain's liver. Jackie busied herself checking readings and taking samples to ensure his electrolyte balance.

"It's going to be a tough couple of weeks, ladies. But I know we can keep him stabilized until Doctor McCoy is able to return. I anticipate that the ENTERPRISE will be making the run back to Earth to bring the Captain to the experimental test facilities in Tucson. I want him to be in the best possible shape for that transition."

Both acknowledged her statement with reserved but determined looks and turned back to their duties. Chapel set up a three-way shift that allowed each of them eight hours on and sixteen hours off and two of them present at all times with the Captain, plus utilizing volunteers from the colony staff.

Christine sighed and went to her quarters. It was going to be a long two weeks until McCoy got back.

Chapter Four

Deep within the consciousness of James T. Kirk, a spark of awareness flared. He could not feel or control his body. His eyes refused to open. He could not move a finger. But his mind worked! He relived the phaser hit. The slow regaining of consciousness, the shout of awareness as the chemical hit his system and the vicious attack by the beast. He cringed before its fury. Yet he did not move. He could not feel the cruel, deep gouges of the curved talons as they ripped the skin and tissue from his body. The last thing he remembered was McCoy's impassioned confession to Spock. 'I can't save him, Spock. There's just too much damage.' He shivered in his mind.

He had faced death many times before. But this life without a body was tortuous!

He gradually became aware of someone's presence with him. It wasn't Spock. He could clearly remember Spock's mind meld. Spock was always trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. The thought of Spock melding with him let him know that they knew his mind was alive.

But the other presence was something else. He could not know that half his face had been ripped off by the beast's desperate struggles to defend its territory. Both his ears had been torn off and one damaged through the auditory canal.

By concentrating, he slowly became aware that he was hearing someone speak! He couldn't quite make out the words but the fact that someone was there was extremely comforting. He relaxed as he realized that the outside world hadn't given up on him.

Jackie finished massaging Kirk's good arm and lay it down beside his unresponsive body. She quit talking also as she noticed Laura coming in. Laura looked at her again showing in her face her disdain of speaking to a practically lifeless and completely unresponsive body.

As Laura turned away, Jackie noticed the time and registered the fact that Laura was almost four hours early. Her brow creased as she thought back over the last week and realized that Laura had always come in early on her relief shift.

Jackie always stayed anyway, often just watching Laura work. The woman toiled with an almost maniacal energy. Watching her now, Jackie could see the strain lines that had deeply etched Laura's face. But her movements were as quick and sure as always.

She watched now as Laura began the process of removing what was left of Kirk's pancreas. The cloned pancreas was in a sterile-covered bowl on the sideboard. In the last week, Laura had cloned some of his internal

organs, but had been held up in how fast she could replace them by how fast his body would accept them.

The frequent surgery made her work harder for trying to maintain his levels correctly. But seeing new organs gradually replace the mutilated ones was worth the extra effort. Jackie just wished she could help more.

She did know from talking with Chris that most of the procedures that Laura used were experimental. She hadn't known that Laura was a research assistant in Tucson and volunteered for the Tantalus colony to try new means of making the changes in the inmates there by changes in their brain composition. The influx of cloned brain tissue to replace that which had been the root of the delusions which adversely affected the patient had been marginally successful.

At first she had shied in horror from the idea of reworking someone's mind. But Laura had explained to her that the cloned tissue was from the inmate's own body and that extensive mapping of the synapse relationship was done before surgery to insure virtually no memory loss. The aim of the research was to provide new tissue, unmarred by possible chemical scarring. Rigid controls insured that the work done was to benefit the inmate and not for scientific research alone.

Jackie had noted the continually shifting electrodes on Kirk's head for the last week and the constantly flashing lights of the computer attached to them. Laura must be mapping his entire brain for some reason. Jackie was sure that his brain had suffered no physical damage in the beast's assault.

Still, some of the output provided information she needed to maintain Kirk's body. What she did not see or know about were the data banks connected to the computer and located in Laura's attached workroom. The Federation had funded the project well in the hopes that the Tantalus colony would no longer be necessary. The data banks were the most massive in existence outside of Memory Prime. Now they held Kirk's entire brain mapping and constantly updated it.

Jackie noted the changes in the body's status on the monitor as the new pancreas began working, forced into action by the protoplaser Laura expertly wielded. She made the appropriate modifications in the computer dosage settings to compensate. Laura looked up and nodded her thanks as the silent alarms above Kirk's head winked out.

Each new organ had continued to function. But because of the extent of the damage, the body as a whole continued to fail despite their constant attention and best intentions. Their main hope was to have Kirk up to a level

where McCoy's more diverse experience might be able to stabilize him for the trip to Earth.

They were failing.

When the indicators told her Kirk's body had been balanced again, Jackie washed up and headed for her room. Her shift was long over and would begin again all too soon as she remembered from her stints at Kress and Tucson General. She would do better to get what rest she could now.

With the thought of Kress, her mind swept unbidden to earlier memories. The old Packard she had kept primed with a gallon of oil a week; the residue from Mrs. Ferguson feeding her cat in it; the cat hair on the carpet. The eager rushing from door to door as she competed for the Canadian trip in the Girl Scouts. The trip itself. All the memories were good ones now.

She sat on the edge of the bed after her shower and thought back to the times on the ENTERPRISE with Uhura and the other crew in the rec room. She realized now just how much she had enjoyed them and wished she could go back and relax. She'd have to see if Uhura could find a French horn and if she could get her lip back. She smiled and lay down and composed herself for sleep.

McCoy looked up bleary-eyed from his computer as Spock entered the lab. He wiped a hand across his face to clear his mind and was surprised at the feel of stubble. "Have to shave," he mumbled to himself. He remembered Spock and looked up.

"I understand the vaccine you modified for the planet's population has been reproduced and distributed according to your plan."

"Yeah. So?"

"I believe the next step is to monitor the results over the next two days to ensure the vaccine is subduing the disease symptoms."

"So tell me something I don't know, Spock!" "Your presence is required elsewhere, doctor."

McCoy started to shout at Spock but realized that things were definitely at a waiting stage and until Malone and her crew could amass the data, he could do little else. He might as well make himself useful. He snatched up a medical kit as he stood, "Well, c'mon Spock."

Twice he stumbled against the wall as they walked down the familiar corridors of the ENTERPRISE. In the turbolift he actually dozed and came awake with a start when it stopped. He looked guiltily at Spock, but the Vulcan was watching the doors slide open. They were just outside his cabin door when he realized where they were. He started to turn to Spock, but the feel of the Vulcan's light grip on his shoulder was the last thing he

remembered.

Spock caught McCoy with one arm and the medical kit with the other. He easily scooped McCoy up and walked into the cabin and deposited his burden on the bed. The nerve pinch had been a light one and he stood at the side of the bed a moment until McCoy's breathing turned to the snores of exhausted sleep. He laid the medical kit on a chair and left the cabin for the bridge.

As he sat in the command chair, he realized that he too had spent the last four cycles on the bridge. With nothing to do but wait, he would also be better occupied conserving his energy. The last message from Nurse Chapel at the Tantalus colony was not encouraging. Kirk's body was slowly failing. For some reason he had failed to pass that message to the doctor. It could wait.

"Mr. Sulu. You have the bridge. I will be in my cabin if needed." Spock noted his sharp acknowledgment as he rose from the helm. Spock saw him slip into the command chair as the turbolift doors closed. His mind began composing itself for rest.

McCoy groaned loudly as he sat up quickly in his bed. The lights in the cabin flared to normal use in response to his rapid motion and he blinked rapidly to acclimate his eyes. He stretched and shifted uneasily to loosen stiff muscles. His sleep fogged brain registered the time and date on his console display and he bolted upright.

Irritably he keyed his comm panel. "Medical lab," Nurse Wilson replied. He readily believed she was probably in on it too. "This is McCoy. What's the status on the plague data?"

"The last of it was entered an hour ago, doctor. The present variables are being entered now and a report should be ready in one hour. Mr. Spock has requested that he be notified on the bridge as soon as it's available."

"I'll just bet he did," McCoy mumbled to himself. "I will be up to scan the data and the report. And I will inform Mr. Spock." His quick press of the comm button to cut off the muffled giggles lost the garbled 'Aye, sir'. He headed for the shower as he peeled his clothes off, grimacing at the accumulated body odor.

One hour later, scrubbed, shaved and carefully dressed, he stepped through the turbolift doors to the bridge. He passed by Uhura returning her smirk with a restrained growl and stepped down to stand beside the command chair.

"Doctor McCoy. I am pleased to note you have regained your usual good humor."

McCoy eyed Spock for a moment and then glanced around the suddenly quiet bridge. "Mission completed, Mr. Spock." His voice was calm, his expression bland. He caught Sulu looking at Chekov and wondering what was going on. "And NOW can we get back to Tantalus?" This last was at a considerable increase in volume and emphasis.

Spock merely stared at the forward view screen. After a moment McCoy turned to look at it too and noted the swift progression of changing star patterns that denoted high warp. He turned back to Spock and eyed him once again. But Spock replied before he could frame his question.

"We left orbit as soon as you beamed down the last of the supplies to the planetary government and advised their Surgeon General what signs to be aware of in their recovery that might signal relapse." McCoy opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. "Transit time to Tantalus is three days, seven hours and twelve minutes. Approximately."

McCoy shrugged and threw up his hands as if to say, 'What have I done to deserve these people.' He stalked to the turbolift and held the doors open with a hand seeing Spock watching him. "The least you could have done was taken off my shoes." The doors cut off the bridge crew's quick laughter.

McCoy prowled sickbay, eying everything. He still carried the printout of the plague report. He always preferred a physical printout of the important things. Everyone was busy except him. He tossed the report on his desk and sat at the computer and began calling up inventory reports on the critical drugs he would need to transport the Captain back to Earth. Tantalus would have them, but he'd be doubly prepared.

He paused as he noted the screen entry on amphetamines. His mind wandered back twelve years to the emergency room at San Francisco General where he first met James T. Kirk.

Lieutenant Leonard McCoy pulled the sheet up over the young boy's face. It was too late. Too much drugs. He slammed his hand in frustration on the side of the bed. Why did the people do it? So stupid. Such a WASTE! If only they had brought him in a little sooner. So young. He brushed the tears from his eyes as he turned away from the wasted flesh. He went into the next room where the young man's mother waited.

She looked up and saw the still brimming eyes and knew. She stood and he held her. "I'm sorry. It was too late. I couldn't do anything for your son."

She clutched him tightly for a moment and then relaxed and patted his back as she moved away and looked at him. "I thank you for doing what you could for my son."

"But I couldn't do anything! I failed!!"

"You cared and you tried. It was all you could do. And I thank you." McCoy held her arms. "And you? What will you do?"

"Now I go back to the living. I have another son, Hikaru. My husband and I are working off planet. This boy was left with his grandparents to finish school. I came back now because of the problems my mother was having with him and to take him back with me. My other son, Hikaru, is a good boy and very bright. He wants to join Star Fleet. When he is old enough, I will try to help him do that. Thank you again, doctor."

McCoy released her and she went to see her now dead son. He turned away and back to the emergency room. It had been a long day already. He shouldn't have volunteered for the back-to-back shifts. But since the other doctor couldn't get here, he had little choice. In a few hours his relief would be here and he could go rest himself. Maybe a slow walk in the woods after a couple of shots of hard whiskey.

He had just settled down to complete some paperwork when he heard the screech of tires outside. He rose quickly and met the incoming parade, guiding them with the injured man to the waiting table. All of them moved back. All but one. McCoy already had his scanner out and was taking vital signs.

"This man is loaded with drugs," he complained loudly. He made an adjustment to the scanner and checked again. "And been hit by a damned phaser. Why didn't they just kill him and be done with it," he shouted as he turned to the equipment cabinet next to the bed. One of the nurses was already baring the patient's arm by cutting away the heavy coat and colorful shirt underneath.

McCoy moved back with the hypo and pushed the young man aside who had remained. He injected the drug antidote and reset the hypo as he reached for his scanner. The young man grabbed his arm.

"Can you help him, doctor," he asked with obvious concern.

"Probably, if you'll stay out of the way and let me work." He shrugged off the hand and moved to the support unit, wheeling it into place beside the table. He looked around angrily as the hand caught his arm again.

"Probably?", the concerned eyes had gone hard. "If you can't help him, tell me. I'll get a Star Fleet doctor down here."

Jerking angrily away from the hand again McCoy snarled, "I AM a goddamn Star Fleet doctor! And the only reason I may not be able to help him is because you are in my way."

The young man drew himself up. "I am Lieutenant Commander

James Kirk . . ."

McCoy finally swung away from the table and moved up nose to nose with Kirk.

"I don't give a damn if you're Admiral Nogura himself. This is my area of expertise. Now either get the hell out of my way and let me save this man or you'll be the patient after him!"

Kirk stared him in the eye for a moment and then released his arm and backed down. "I'm sorry, doctor. He's my brother. I'll get out of your way."

McCoy's eyes narrowed, "Like hell you will." Kirk looked up surprised. "I need some help here. Get over on the other side of this table and get the rest of his clothes off."

"Yes, sir," Kirk spit out as he leaped to obey. McCoy began making connections and swung the unit back into place as the nurse returned with the plasma.

They both worked efficiently and in chorus. Kirk did not object when she gently nudged him aside to complete her work.

McCoy spoke as he worked. "The support unit will give him assistance with his breathing and other body functions. He doesn't need blood but the plasma will give us a base to work with as the machine filters the drugs from his blood."

He paused as he read the diagnostics on the panel and then reset the hypo again and pressed it against the man's neck. The hiss it made was the only sound in the room. He watched the scanner's readout closely and administered a second, smaller, dose.

Finally he nodded to himself and turned to Kirk. "Massive dose. I noted the puncture wound. Someone pump him up?"

Kirk nodded and spoke quietly. "We've been working undercover for some time to gather enough evidence. Sam's worked with me before although he's not in Star Fleet. He was instructed to get out before the bust went down, but he stuck around to help. I should have made sure he was gone." Kirk's mouth pinched tighter.

"At any rate, we got all but one of the hired muscle. He grabbed Sam as a hostage and pumped him up when he realized it wouldn't work. The phaser beam that brought him down caught Sam in its periphery."

"A drug bust? Did you get the big guys?", McCoy continued to get Kirk to talk. "The biggest. All in jail by now."

McCoy looked back to the diagnostics on the support panel. He nodded to himself and the looked back to Kirk. "Your brother will be okay now. We'll keep him on support for a few more hours and then

release him."

He observed Kirk's relief wash over him as his face went slack and his body relaxed. McCoy shook his head. "I just wish we could get them all in time," he said thinking of the dead boy in the next room. He motioned for Kirk to follow and led the way next door.

The boy's mother was gone. The nurse had collected the final information and all that remained was the wasted flesh. "This boy came in too late. I tried to save him but couldn't. I had to tell his mother." Kirk reached out with a comforting hand on McCoy's shoulder.

"I'm glad you got those bastards." He brushed a sleeve across his eyes and turned to Kirk. "Listen. The mother said she had another son living off planet. A research station, I think. She said he wanted to join Star Fleet. Could you hunt them down and give the kid a chance?"

"I could try. If he meets the requirements, I'm sure they'd want him. What's his name?"

McCoy looked over the paperwork accompanying the body. "Sulu. Hikaru Sulu. Here's the local address.

They can tell you where the family is."

"I'll check it out, Doctor. We have ships stopping by all the research stations and settler's worlds. I'll ask one of my friends to look them up."

Kirk left soon after being reassured by McCoy that his brother would be okay.

McCoy came back with a start, staring at the computer screen for a moment before he got his bearings. He shook his head. He was glad he had been able to save Sam that night. But he also remembered being with Kirk on Denab when they found Kirk's brother dead and his wife dying from the strange parasitic life forms.

McCoy shook his head again to clear it and returned to his inventory. This ship would be ready to take his captain and friend back to Earth.

Chapter Five

Jackie slipped her tray on the table and sat and sipped her tea. One of her recent friends from the colony had mentioned to her at the food processor that the ENTERPRISE was returning and scheduled to be in orbit in thirty-six hours. She hoped they could keep Kirk alive that much longer.

She looked up at an adjoining table as she put her tea down. Evidently a child with some visitor to the colony. Her thoughts leaped back to her own three children: Johnny, Vickie and Angela. All grown now with lives of their own.

She started as Chris Chapel set her cup of coffee down. "Just taking a little break. Laura seems to have things well in hand."

Jackie frowned and stated, "Her shift should have ended hours ago."

Chris nodded, "She couldn't sleep, so she came down to try one more thing." She sighed heavily as she looked into her coffee, "I don't think the Captain is going to make it."

"But the ENTERPRISE will be here in less than three days!"

Chris shook her head. "His system is just gradually shutting down. I've seen it before in patients with massive amounts of damage. Laura's work has helped but even the surgery required to put her clones in place has taken its own toll of his dwindling resources. If we're lucky, Doctor McCoy will make it back in time and we may be able to keep him alive long enough to make the transit to Earth." Both women were silent for a moment. Finally Chris shook her head and looked up at Jackie. "I guess you'll be looking forward to visiting when we beam down to Tucson. Do you have any family still living there?"

Jackie nodded, "Yes. My father. I met my husband there too. He was in the Air Force at the time."

Chris looked up and nodded, "Well, back to the present. I guess I'll see you in the lab a little later." Jackie just nodded and Chris smiled at her, patting her arm as she rose and took her cup to the recycler. Jackie nodded to herself and rose with her tray. A couple of things to do and it would be time to be back on duty again.

Jackie updated herself from the computer console in the corner as Chris punched in the latest information on the main console. She scanned the life sign readings and shook her head at the noticeable dip since she had gone off duty.

"I'm glad to see that Laura finally went to get some rest." "She didn't. She's in her lab."

Jackie frowned, "Chris, she's driving herself too hard. I know she's done a lot but his vitals are still dropping. She needs to rest."

Chris nodded and laid her data pad on the table. "You're right. I've been trying to let her get as much done as she could. But she's wrecking her own health for no reason. I'm going to insist she get some rest."

Both turned as Laura came out of her lab and over to the table. Chris stopped her and turned her away from the table. "Laura?" Laura focused on Chris' face. "You have been driving yourself too hard. I insist that you leave now and get at least eight hours solid sleep before you return."

The lines etched deeply over the exhaustion in her face drew tight as her eyes opened in alarm. "But Chris, I have three more transplants scheduled in the next twelve hours and I have too ..."

"You have to get some rest! That's an order."

Laura turned desperately, her eyes searching Jackie's face but noted no sympathy there. She turned back to Chris and opened her mouth but closed it again at the stern determination in her expression. She dropped her head and began crying.

Chris and Jackie shared a look and Chris shook her head. Laura wiped her eyes and looked up. "I have to shut down a few things in my lab. Will you have a cup of coffee with me before I go to bed?"

Chris glanced at Jackie, who nodded, and smiled at Laura, "Of course I will." Laura nodded and walked away. Chris shook her head again and picked the data pad back up to complete her updating.

Jackie looked up as she heard footsteps approaching and was shocked to see Laura come back into the room. A very refreshed Laura. But no Chris Chapel trailed her.

She looked closer at Laura as she stopped before her. The strain lines were almost gone; her eyes, bright and clear. Her voice when she spoke was vibrant, "Chris and I talked and she said I could finish up one more try at rejuvenating his system, but then I had to get some sleep."

She followed Jackie's glance to the empty doorway and continued, "Chris said she was going to stop by her room for a moment and be right back to check on me." At Jackie's fractional but dubious nod she smiled. "I'll get some rest, I promise."

Jackie smiled uncertainly. "I just hate to see you tear yourself up for no real reason. All of us have done the very best we could for the Captain. He was a dynamic individual and my few personal encounters with him left me shocked at the depth of my feelings. He engendered loyalty and team spirit. With him as the captain, I felt we could do anything."

She paused and patted Laura's arm. "But he would be the first to tell you there is a time and place to cut your loses. He would have considered you to be a prime asset of the Federation. And he would have sent you to bed DAYS ago."

Laura's eyes moistened and some of her verve thinned. But she shook her head and smiled back at Jackie. "Then I guess I'd better hurry and get this done before Chris gets back and runs me off." She took a few deep breaths. "Could you help me get him setup in my lab in the back?"

Jackie nodded and followed Laura's lead. Soon they had his support functions totally run by the portable unit attached to the bed. With the assistance of the colony medical personnel on duty, they eased his mobile unit into the back laboratory.

It was the first time Jackie had ever been in it and she couldn't help but look around as she monitored Kirk's life signs and helped guide his bed into position.

The room was larger than she thought. One whole side was taken up with the computer banks. She recognized two different types of regen equipment and four other pieces, which looked to be cloning chambers from the associated readouts. Three were in operation. A door led to what she assumed to be a storeroom.

Transferring his functions back to the system hookups in Laura's lab took her attention then and she meticulously checked each item and setting. Finally she stepped back satisfied.

Laura finished what she was doing about the same time and joined her at the computer console. "I have about half an hour to wait before my material is ready and he's sufficiently stabilized. Would you join me for a cup of coffee?"

Jackie quickly checked her readouts once more and nodded, "Sure, Laura. But I don't drink coffee. I'll have some tea." She glanced back once more at the readouts. "He's mostly stabilized now. Your transplants have really made a difference." Rick from the station staff took her place at the console as she and Laura left.

In the lounge, Jackie sat as Laura got a cup of coffee for herself and tea for Jackie. They sat for a moment, not saying anything, just sipping their drinks and wrapped in their own thoughts.

Finally Laura looked up at her. "I want to tell you a little story, Jackie. I just finished telling Chris a little while ago and now I think its your turn."

She shifted slightly in her seat, sitting straighter and squaring her shoulders before continuing. "Once upon a time there was a young lady from

a poor but proud family.

She was somewhat brighter than most of her classmates and dreamed of the things she could do. She could see herself as a doctor and doing things and making advances that helped thousands."

"But money and lack of recognition at her level held her back. She developed a very firm determination to take advantage of every possibility offered. She worked hard. But hard work wasn't enough. She ended up compromising some of her principles to get chances."

She paused and sighed, "Naturally she was taken advantage of and discarded. But she learned from her mistakes and moved toward her goal."

Her eyes looked off into the distance as she continued, "Then, almost twelve years ago, I was working in a hospital emergency room in San Francisco when I met and worked with Leonard McCoy. He was young and brash and full of fire and his ability to go places and do things. I liked him."

Her eyes came back to focus and she looked down and unconsciously adjusted the folds of her skirt. "I also met your captain then. He was dynamic even then. A mover and a shaker. I saw him as an opportunity to jump into Star Fleet and set out to use him."

She shook her head. "I used him alright." She looked directly in Jackie's eyes for the first time. "I fell hopelessly in love with him. It took him awhile to realize that I had been initially playing him along and my motives. But when he did, he broke it off."

Laura brushed a tear away. "I was heart broken. Surprisingly, we became friends. He and Leonard were instrumental in getting me accepted by Star Fleet. But he made it very clear that his sponsorship was based on my abilities in the medical field and not on anything we had shared, however briefly.

We remained friends but we never shared an intimate moment after that." She shrugged and continued, "He couldn't quite bring himself to trust me again."

"And I couldn't really blame him. Then I moved on to Star Fleet and he went on to a new starship and his career. We communicated occasionally but both of us were much to busy leaping forward to spend much time looking back."

Her eyes searched Jackie's again and she smiled as she saw the look of fear as Jackie realized she had been drugged. "I never forgot him, Jackie. I loved him and that love grew over the years. He was the first person, male or female, that helped me without wanting something in return. That only made it something deeper."

She reached over and eased Jackie against the back of the couch.

"That's why, when I now have it in my power to do something for him, I'm going to do it. I've respected him and loved him for too many years to let him go."

She stopped as Jackie's eyes closed and she motioned for her friends in the lounge to come and help her. "She's alright. Just tired and worn out from to much on duty time. I gave her a little something to help her sleep. She'll be fine in a few hours. If you'll get her situated in her room, I'll get back to our patient."

Laura watched them carry Jackie off and turned back to the lab. She reflected momentarily that she and Chris would be a little upset when they woke up, but she must have her chance. And she was sure both of them would have tried to stop her.

In the lab she entered the back room and hurried to the largest cloning booth. She entered her code and hastily scanned the telltales and sighed in relief. Perfect. Slowly she opened the heavy door and wheeled out the table.

Carefully she checked over every connection and attached the electrodes to the familiar features of James T. Kirk.

It was the first time she had cloned an entire human being and she hurried to call up the ancient formulae and procedures she had discovered in her research of the Fabrini papers. Most of them had been under lockout in the computer system when she first accessed it back on Earth. But persistence had overcome and she held the secrets of the Fabrini's massive medical advances at her fingertips.

She had checked and double checked all the references. It was dangerous, but she felt it was worth the risk to save Jim's life. She left the body, after one more check to make sure it was functioning properly on its full life support system, and withdrew the rack of chemicals she had painstakingly prepared over the last week.

A quick check with the analyzer verified that all of the vials contained the proper, necessary drugs. She called up the Fabrini section she needed and began following the procedures outlined there. Her eyes blurred for a moment and she stepped back and shook her head.

No time for a little thing like exhaustion to stop her. She reached in her pocket and removed the hypo and carefully gave herself a dose. Her vision cleared almost immediately and her pulse raced for a moment as the chemicals tricked her body into responding. Finally, she pushed away from the wall and went back to the computer console.

Patiently she made the connections through the computer from Kirk's present body to the new one nearby. She paused from time to time to

administer small doses from the vials at her side to the new body.

The hours slipped by. She glanced at the chrono and noticed with a start that twenty hours had passed. She had stopped three more times to use the hypo in her pocket. But each time required more and more massive doses. She could feel her body rebelling but stiffening a moment and then continuing.

She knew Chris would be coming out of her drug induced sleep soon. She had to hurry. Carefully she increased the strength of the signal to the new body and decreased the signal by the same amount to the old one. More chemicals. Minute adjustments.

Finally the readings told her what she had been waiting for. Kirk's consciousness was waking up in the new body. Both bodies and the computer shared the consciousness now. Finer tuning, more chemicals. Gradually she reduced the current to the ravaged body.

The new body continued to function normally. She lay two hypos next to the new body. The next step would be crucial. She gave herself a what she promised was a final dose of the hypo in her pocket. It had to be the last. She barely felt the increase in energy. Her body was almost at the point where it would not respond. And an even more massive dose would put her completely under.

Well, she knew what she was getting into when she started. She hooked up the leads to her own scalp and gradually increased the power. Her mind grew fuzzy and she almost panicked at the thought that she might fail. But it was only the blending of her and Kirk's minds.

She searched and found herself in his memories. He had loved her! He still did care for her very much. But she sensed the moral edge of the man that refused to let him take advantage of her. She clung to the thought of his love and his friendship as she made an extreme effort and managed to function outside the meld.

She picked up one of the hypos and heard its hiss sharply over the other equipment as she pressed it to his arm. Kirk's new body began to stir and she dropped the hypo and grabbed the other one.

His eyes fluttered and opened and squinted against the harsh light. He felt extremely weak. His eyes gradually focused and he made out Laura's face. "Larghhu.” His previously unused vocal cords tried to form her name.

She quickly gave him a dose from the other hypo. His eyes glazed over and closed and she heaved a sigh of relief.

This body had retained his consciousness and become fully functional. He had recognized her! She staggered against the table and fear gave her additional drive. She ripped the electrodes from herself and then

more carefully from him. One by one she reduced the life support systems until he was functioning on his own. The sleep was induced by the last hypo. He was complete!

She quickly went into the main lab and checked the old body. Even as she watched, the body completed its shut down, the tired and stressed flesh unable to maintain the brief spark of life in it. A tear formed in her eye and she batted it away angrily. She had no time for this!

She quickly disconnected the leads and swung the mobile bed away from the computer. She almost ran into the other room and only stopped when she came up sharply against the door facing. She used the pain to focus her energies and wheeled the handsome sleeping man out, through the lab and into the main recovery room they had been initially using.

The monitors registered the sleeping body and she patted Kirk's hand and went back into her lab. She was barely able to swing the heavy table and its inert load over to one of the tissue disposal units.

She cried and cried as she used the laser scalpel to carve up the cold flesh and feed it into the disposal unit. Finally she pushed in the bloodied sheets. She washed her hands again and again and finally went out to the recovery room with them still wet and reassured herself with the slowly flashing monitors. She staggered to her room and crawled into the bed, instantly unconscious.

Chapter Six

Spock finished mentally composing his log entry detailing their efforts on Gamma Beta Seven. His bi-functional brain had made periodic notes on the bridge interaction as he composed the report. With its completion he again devoted his full attention to the present conditions.

His eyes narrowed imperceptibly as he viewed the usual star display on the main viewer. He stood and moved to the science console, looking over Ensign Dorman's shoulder at the sensor display. Dorman shifted uncomfortably, knowing why Spock had come over to the console and waiting for his comments.

But Spock merely walked back to the command chair, seated himself and pressed the button for Engineering.

"Scott here," came the familiar voice with a touch of a sigh. "Why are we traveling at warp 9.7, Mr. Scott?"

There was silence from the intercom for a long moment. "Testing the changes made in the formula to the intermix chambers, Mr. Spock."

"I am unaware of the regulation which requires testing at such high speed."

The answer came more quickly this time but with deep resignation, "Aye, sir." Then more eagerly as Scott continued, "Aye, sir. I'm not sure of it meself. I'll look it up and let ye know. Scott out."

Spock felt the attention of the bridge crew as he carefully released the comm button. All of the bridge crew knew that basic ship's functions like heading and speed were displayed at every console. And all relaxed a little as they realized that Spock was going along for the ride.

"Update, Mr. Sulu?"

"Six hours, fourteen minutes to Tantalus orbit," Sulu responded quickly. Only then realizing that his quick response without reference to equipment verification told Spock that he was not only aware of their increased speed but planning on it.

He ducked his head slightly and glanced back at Spock in the command chair. "Thank you, Mr. Sulu." He pressed another button on the chair arm as he leaned back.

"McCoy here."

"Due to unexpected testing of the intermix chamber formula, we will be arriving at Tantalus 27.6 hours early, doctor. I felt it prudent to make you aware since your preparations are paramount to the successful completion of our next phase."

The silence was prolonged. The entire bridge crew knew that McCoy

had his arrangements completed hours ago. And that it was his complaints to Scott that had prompted Engineering to "test formula changes".

Spock was almost ready to speak again when McCoy responded, "I believe we will have everything under control here, Mr. Spock."

"I will be down to assist you in a few minutes, doctor. Apparently my talents aren't needed on the bridge at this time." Spock quickly released sickbay's button and stood. "Mr. Sulu. You have the bridge. I shall be in my quarters making the log entry for Gamma Beta Seven."

Sulu flinched as he rose from the helm to take the command chair, Spock's non-specific but pointed rebuke ringing in his ears. "Aye, sir."

Spock paused by Uhura's Comm console. "I don't believe it is necessary to inform the doctor of my intermediate stop, Lieutenant."

Uhura smiled and replied, "Aye, sir."

On Tantalus, Chris Chapel groaned and sat up in her bed. Her body ached from being in one position for so many hours. It took her a moment to orient herself to her room and then to remember that she and Laura had been having a cup of coffee when she lost consciousness.

Drugged! But why? With fear supplying impetus over her sluggish body she moved quickly for the door, brushing her uniform into place as she hurried to the recovery room.

Her quick glance told her the recovery room was empty except for Kirk's bed. She swiveled to head for the comm unit when her searching eyes found Kirk's telltales and she ran into the counter as her brain interpreted the readings.

She quickly ran the computer through the diagnostics, finally going over to the bed to verify that the patient was her Captain. He was in perfect health! Her pocket scanner made a quick pass over his sheet covered form to eliminate a possible computer malfunction. Perfect!

She dropped the scanner into her pocket and her finger brushed lightly over the handsome face, over the place where ragged sutures had held tortured flesh together. Not a mark!

She drifted slowly back to the comm panel and keyed in Jackie's room since her scrutiny of the chrono told her it was Jackie's shift. When she received no response, she keyed for a station wide page.

When that elicited no response, she made a final check of Kirk's condition and hurried to Jackie's room. She had to punch in the medical emergency override code to get the panel to open. Jackie was sprawled across her bed, the covers pushed back to reveal her clothes. Chris hastily

ran the pocket scanner over her quietly breathing form and sighed in relief. Drugged but just sleeping quietly now.

She shook Jackie gently and then lightly slapped her face to rouse her. Jackie groaned and then swallowed convulsively to get moisture into her parched throat. Chris got two glasses of water from the room dispenser and returned to the bedside and handed her one.

Jackie started to speak and croaked and swallowed gratefully of the tepid water. "The Captain?"

"He's okay, Jackie. What happened?"

She sat up straighter and swung her legs over the side of the bed and sat still as her dazed brain fought to make sense of her situation. "Laura. In the lounge." Awareness widened her eyes, "She drugged me!"

"And me too. We'll check her out in a minute. I want to get back to the Captain and do a complete diagnostic on him."

Jackie frowned her concern. "Is he dying?"

Chris frowned back. "No. And that's what worries me." She placed her glass on the bedside table next to Jackie's and helped her to stand. She hurried back to the Captain's side with a puzzled Jackie in tow.

Hours later, Chris pushed her chair back from the computer console and stretched. She and Jackie shared wary looks. The Captain's body was completely whole. Neither woman had ever seen such a recovery, even with cloned transplants. They had initiated some treatments for electrolyte balancing but those were all complete now.

Chris had risen with the idea of awakening him when one of the colony staff entered. "The ENTERPRISE has advised us she will be entering orbit in six minutes. Commander Spock and Doctor McCoy will be beaming down to the colony transporter room in two minutes."

Chris nodded her acceptance and looked to Jackie who nodded at her questioning look.

Chris smiled and quickly followed the staff member to the transporter room.

Spock and McCoy were just coalescing on the transporter pads as she arrived. McCoy noted her presence immediately and his set features told her his probing eyes were searching her face for current information and knowing it would be bad.

Chris had to physically reach out and stop his forward progress. McCoy's look became stricken. She hastened to reassure him. "The Captain

is fine, Leonard."

McCoy's expressions ran the gamut as he struggled to absorb this unexpected information.

Even Spock's gaze narrowed. She patted his arm and led them to the recovery room.

Twenty minutes later, McCoy had examined the results of every test the women had run and checked Kirk's current condition twice. "That's impossible." At Spock's thoughtful look, he continued, "Don't tell me you've heard of this before, Spock."

Spock slowly nodded and looked McCoy in the eye. "You have also, doctor. Think back to Yonada, doctor."

McCoy's look saddened as he remembered the lovely Natira he had almost left his Star Fleet career for when he had been diagnosed with the fatal disease, xenopolycythemia.. But he had been made whole by the treatments outlined in the medical library of Yonada's mobile world.

"The Fabrini records!!," McCoy blurted. "But I recommended the majority of those records be placed under strictest seal. You were the one who put the computer security system in place, Spock, after the council's approval."

Spock had moved to the computer console and was accessing information almost too rapidly to read. It took him three tries using command overrides to access the computer in Laura's lab. He looked up as Jackie returned from checking on Laura in her room.

"Doctor! She's barely conscious. I think she's dying."

McCoy glanced once more at the Captain's vital signs and grabbed the medical pack he had dropped on entering. "Lead the way, Lieutenant."

They rapidly traversed the passageways and the door readily opened to their approach.

McCoy played his scanner over the fully clothed but twisted body. He dug in his case and withdrew a hypo and quickly reset it, pressing it against her bare shoulder. He scanned her once more and reapplied the hypo. He checked her again and shook his head as he turned to Spock.

"Massive and continuous drug use covering a week or more. Her body is rejecting everything I try. We may be able to stabilize her for awhile, but I'll need to get her started on a therapy session."

From the depths of her drug inspired hell, Laura stirred and reached out to McCoy. "No.

NO!" She swallowed and lay back but was up on an elbow almost immediately. "I must speak with Mr. Spock. Before anything else, I must

speak with him." She sank back to the bed, asleep almost at once.

Spock silently moved forward from his position by the wall and stood by her bed. "I am here, commander."

At the sound of his voice Laura forced her eyes open and her face reflected her anxiety. "You must meld your mind with mine." She struggled up to a sitting position and looked up in Spock's face. "Please! I must explain and there is little time. You must know some things about Jim Kirk." She coughed and lay back down. "And I'm the only one who can explain it all."

Spock was still for a long moment but then slowly nodded to her. Her eyes closed in instant relief. But they opened quickly when she heard McCoy preparing his hypo again. "No drugs! I must remain as lucid as possible." She squeezed his arm, "Later, Leonard. Later."

McCoy frowned but moved back from the bed. Spock moved closer and his hand gently fell into the proper contact points on her face. He stiffened perceptibly and resisted slightly when her hand captured his free hand and placed it on the opposite side of her face. His face went slack as he began assimilating information.

The room was deathly quiet, all attention focused on the dissimilar pair who now thought as one. Laura's hands crept up her body toward Spock's but stopped by an obvious effort of her will and flew to her sides and clutched the sheets.

"You must see it all," she forced through clenched teeth. Spock's head dipped in mute acknowledgment and she cried out. Tears flowed from her eyes with their flickering lids. A moment later, Spock suddenly broke the contact and slowly withdrew his hands.

Laura struggled to sit but only managed to support herself on her elbows. Her face mirrored the hope she prayed for as she spoke to him, "You do understand, don't you? A difference which makes no difference is no difference." Spock stared into space for a long moment but then his gaze slipped down the wall and met her own. He nodded.

Laura's breath escaped in a deep, heartfelt sigh of relief. "Thank you, Spock." Her eyes closed and she shuddered, "Thank you."

McCoy leaped forward and quickly scanned her. But everyone in the room recognized the click of finality with which he shut off the scanner. He replaced it in his pocket and gently disengaged her hands from the sheet and pulled it the rest of the way up her still form. He looked once more at the face of a woman he had come to know well and admire over the years and then gently covered it.

No one spoke for several moments and then Spock moved for the door. McCoy grabbed one arm as he passed by and his face swung up to

Spock's reflecting all the sorrow he was feeling. Both were silent as McCoy searched his face and then let him go. "I must see the Captain, doctor. I will need your assistance."

McCoy looked away and nodded and then fell in behind Spock as he left the room.

An hour later, Kirk was sluggishly regaining consciousness. His eyes flickered open and quickly squinted against the glare of the strong lights over his bed. Jackie hurried to dim them to normal brilliance and his eyes blinked rapidly as he forced them to focus on the scene around him.

Spock, McCoy, Chapel and Miller. His eyes registered them and his mind catalogued them and recalled brief images of them from earlier times. They took in the profusion of medical equipment and moved to the walls and the doorway.

He realized that he was no longer aboard the ENTERPRISE and turned again to Spock. "The ship?" Spock nodded his assurance and Kirk shifted his gaze to McCoy. "Well, Bones. What's the verdict? Will I live?"

McCoy started to smile and then stopped and looked to Spock. Kirk looked there too and saw something he had rarely seen in Spock's face before; indecision. He labored to sit and McCoy and Chapel helped him, but his gaze remained riveted on Spock.

He could feel the tension in the air and it puzzled him. He flexed his arms and legs and tried out other parts of his body as his eyes remained locked with Spock's. Finally he spit out, "Report!"

To Kirk's intense amazement, Spock turned and examined the drapes bordering the windows. "Do you remember this color, Captain?"

Kirk stared at him a moment in surprise but then realized from the concentrated attention of the others that he was the subject of some sort of examination. His brow furrowed a moment and he looked down at the sheet. He trusted Spock implicitly. And if Spock felt this was necessary, then he would go along.

"Its the awful yellow that Carol insisted on using in the lounge on the research station." His voice lowered, "Where I met my son, David, for the first time."

He could see Miller scanning the other's faces to check on what he had said since she had not been on the ENTERPRISE at that time. Chapel nodded to her.

Spock slowly turned and looked Kirk in the eye.

Spock sat in the command chair and watched the ordinary star shift

displayed on the main viewer. McCoy shifted at his side and Spock commented, "It is out of our hands now, doctor."

"I know, Spock." His voice dropped low enough for only Spock to hear. "We completely wiped Laura's computer memory banks and shut down her lab until another Star Fleet doctor can take over the research. Everything has been cleaned and hushed up. I agree that only the four of us should know what actually happened."

McCoy shifted from foot to foot in an angry shuffle, angry at having no place to go to relieve his worries. He looked up from the deck and leaned closer to Spock and whispered fiercely, "But what about Jim?"

McCoy leaned back as he noticed Sulu's and Chekov's attention. Spock commented quietly, "We will know within ten minutes, doctor." At McCoy's surprised look, Spock continued. "He is aware of all the facts, doctor. The difference is no difference to us. If he can accept it, then he is still the Captain and your friend. And mine."

Spock sat back and McCoy could barely hear him.

"If he cannot accept it, then I am not sure who he is." They both were silent for a moment. The turbolift doors swooshed open and McCoy froze facing the main viewer. Spock immediately stood and turned to the lift.

His assessment of James T. Kirk was returned with interest. Spock's facial muscles relaxed only slightly but McCoy caught it and swung around. Uhura's voice broke the silence. "Captain on the bridge."

Spock moved to the other side of the command chair and took up his familiar pose with his hands behind his back. "Welcome back, Captain."

Kirk slid back in the command chair and lightly squeezed the arms. "Yes, Mr. Spock. Its good to be back." McCoy patted him lightly on the shoulder and headed for the turbolift.

Kirk leaned forward. "Report!" He absorbed the routine as he reflected that he really couldn't conceive of being anywhere else. Yes, he was very glad to be back.