

# The Operative

JK 2011

A Star Trek Novel

R. Marcus Turnbull

# Chapter One

Jean O'Connor is having the dream again.

She is being chased down dark, dank tubes of stone, the rough-hewn surfaces dripping crystal droplets onto a floor whose slickness is almost organic. The air is thick and still, smelling musty, as if nothing living has breathed it for a very long time. Sounds of her running feet, her ragged breathing are muffled, die out after brief ghostlike echoes.

Behind her, always around a bend, but inexorable, comes...something. She knows what it is. But she can't see it. Maybe she *has* seen it, but maybe not. Maybe that was only a dream, a terrible nightmare that stubbornly refused to surrender to the sanity of her room and little bed. She *does* know that whatever is following her is hideous. She knows that if she sees it, if it gets that close to her, she will die.

As surely as it killed her father.

She rounds a corner, her breath coming in hot rivers down her throat, burning her lungs, echoing the adrenaline burning down her veins. A stitch in her side threatens to keep her from breathing at all. With a sickening realization, she sees a wall before her.

Dead end.

She tries to stop, but the footing here is not the best, and she slips, slides, and finally crashes into the rock wall that she knows will be her death. Her hands hurt from the impact, from the scrapes and bruises that will plague her tomorrow, if she lives. Her jumper is soaked through from a stagnant puddle on the floor and from blood oozing from her fabric-burned knees.

She turns, breathing hard, an animal at bay. She spreads her hands on the cold stones at her back, trying to become one with them, to melt into them, but they offer no shelter, no comfort.

Save for her breathing, which sounds perilously loud in her ears, the tunnels are quiet as a tomb. The thing following has paused, perhaps savoring the incipient capture of its prey. Now she hears it begin walking again, feet click-clicking on the uneven flooring, a clock tapping out the remaining seconds of her life.

A shadow—*its* shadow—oozes around the last turn she took. It is vaguely human-shaped, flickering in the guttering torch light, the last bit of light in the dim caverns. Time seems to have stopped. The shadow lengthens, but almost imperceptibly. Finally, an ink-dark silhouette appears, standing on the shadow's black feet.

She sees *it* as it steps forward, and her heart nearly stops. It looks like a man, not even an ugly man, but she knows better. She has seen it before, after all; that *couldn't* have been a dream. She remembers how quickly it moved, how gleefully it killed her father. She remembers its face as it did it, a face filled with wild inhuman ferocity, or perhaps joy or—her five-year old mind does not know the word, but she sensed the emotion—exultation.

Now the face is sculpted differently, the devil play-acting. It—he—is mocking her, pretending to be concerned, soothing. It reaches to touch her. She can shrink back no more into the unyielding stone; she turns her head away so hard the stone wall cuts her cheek, her eyes

straining to keep him in view, until she looks like a terrified colt. He smiles, chilling her. His lips part, and she sees his teeth, pointed, gleaming cruelly like blood in the reddish light.

He opens his mouth wider, preparing to feed, and she screams until her throat feels like it is tearing.



Her screams awaken her. She is dripping with sweat. Several slow seconds pass before reality reasserts itself, before the enclosing rock walls, the bloody teeth fade, leaving her safe in the familiarity of her cabin aboard the starship *Enterprise*, years and parsecs away from her childhood horror.

Her cabinmate slumbers on undisturbed in his bunk against the far wall. It took only a few nights of screaming before he set the sonic deadeners to muffle her side of the room.

She really doesn't blame him. In fact, she is grateful. Now, at least, he can't hear her cry herself back to sleep, as she has done so often in the past.



In another part of the ship, up where there are staterooms instead of cabins, the captain, James T. Kirk, also sleeps fitfully.

His evening has been spent reviewing reports just in from Starfleet that outline the growing tensions between the three major powers in and around the human-occupied portion of the galaxy. In the last few months, relations have soured between the United Federation of Planets, Starfleet's parent body, and both the Klingon Empire and the Romulans.

Not that they were ever all that good.

He is wise enough in the way of the galaxy to know that sometimes, for no apparent reason, things just go to hell. Petty frictions between what are essentially cold-war enemies accumulate, pressure rises, like the forces at play between tectonic plates that have momentarily rubbed too tightly against one another. Sooner or later, the pressure is relieved in an eruption, a border skirmish, an outright war. Unfortunate, yes, even terrible. But part of the nature of things, and not life-threatening to any of the participant federations/superorganisms involved in the balance of power, no matter how many of their component cells die in the conflagration.

But this time things are different. Usually, none of the three powers has gotten along with the others. But now, there are dark hints that the old, broken, unholy alliance between the Klingons and Romulans might even be reforged. Separately, neither the Klingon warriors nor the grim cousins of the Vulcans are an overpowering match for the Federation. But together...

Kirk's dreams are filled with dark symbolism, vague threats, fierce alien faces, dying starships. His sleeping mind cannot tell for certain if they are faces and ships he has seen destroyed in the past—God knows there have been enough—or if they are prophecies. Some of the faces look like his, some of the ships, the *Enterprise*.



The intercom whistle mercifully awakens him.

“Kirk here,” he says groggily, relieved to be free of the half-remembered dream's grip.

“Captain,” a woman’s soft, tranquil voice says, “we have just received a priority one message for you from Starfleet Command. It’s marked ‘eyes only’ and coded for short-duration reading.”

He groans softly into the darkness, suddenly much more awake, and rubs a hand thoughtfully across the stubble on his chin.

“Very well,” he says. “Transfer to my cabin, please, Uhura.”

“Aye, sir. Transferring message now.”

In his mind’s eye, he imagines the message as a living thing crawling down the fiber pathways from the bridge to his cabin’s display like some malevolent millipede. The imagery, he knows, is not all that far off.

Messages of that sort are really more semi-intelligent programs than data, controlling their own route, reading, and demise. The packaging program is quite sophisticated, able to defeat almost any attempt to copy or read it without authorization. He has every confidence in its abilities and in the security of the message. He should; his first officer designed the algorithm.

“Lights,” he says.

The cabin, in deference to the hour, slowly increases the illumination, giving his eyes time to adjust.

It is a spartan room, with few mementos. Not much more than the functional bed he is sitting on, a large desk, its top empty except for a coffee mug holding styluses and some old-fashioned pens, a couple of chairs, and one vine that he refuses to admit he is slowly killing.

The little ornamentation he has allowed in his room tends toward the nautical. There is a brass-cased binnacle, a sextant, a model of his first *Enterprise* on the shelves built into one wall. There are a few real books about sailing the oceans of Earth and about sailing heroes, too, both fact and fiction: a biography of Nelson, a few Horatio Hornblower novels.

He stumbles to the head, relieves himself, and takes a moment to splash water on his face from the small sink, then grabs a cup of black coffee from the replicator. He studiously avoids looking at the red message light that begins blinking on the display, heralding the arrival of the insectoid message, instead grabbing a few precious moments in which to collect his thoughts.

“Eyes only” messages are very rarely sent, and it has been his experience that they never mean anything but trouble for the recipient. He has the familiar, fleeting fear that he will fail to remember all the specifics of the message before it erases itself. He grimaces, annoyed with himself.

Sitting down, he presses a button to activate the message. He feels more than sees the flash as his retinas are scanned.

“You are Captain James T. Kirk,” the message says, using the computer’s own emotionless voice.

*Thanks, Kirk thinks sourly. I’d wondered about that.*

“You are authorized to read this message twice. Beginning display now.”

He begins to read. Unconsciously, he frowns. His forgotten coffee grows cold as the text and images scroll past, automatically keeping up with his reading speed. When he finishes, he rewinds and reads it through again, then he sits back and thinks silently as he waits for confirma-

tion that the last vestiges of the message have been deleted. Where it was in the computer is now filled with random noise.

The frown never leaves his face.



The main conference room is a warm, richly paneled chamber with a long wooden table that sometimes doubles as a dining table when important guests pay a visit. Along the walls are reminders of earlier incarnations of the proud *Enterprise* line: models and paintings of ocean-going ships, space shuttles, and starships, paintings of battles, even portraits of illustrious captains. The lighting is indirect and comforting, almost the exact hue of mid-autumn late afternoon sunlight on Earth. Ethnocentric to the Terrans aboard, like more of Starfleet than Kirk would like to admit. Still, no one has complained yet.

Kirk sits down at the head of the table.

So much has changed, he thinks, since he first took command of his original *Enterprise*, so long ago now. This ship is better in almost every way than NCC-1701 was—newer, faster, more powerful, better appointed. He only has to look at this conference room and contrast it with the ones on the first ship—cramped, spare little rooms furnished only with a long synthetic table, several chairs, library computer displays, and scatterings of nondescript abstract light sculptures on the walls.

Yet, as glad as Kirk is to have a second chance to command an *Enterprise*, he misses the original. NCC-1701A is a fine ship, and he loves her; but she can't completely replace his first, dead love in his heart.

The ship isn't all that has changed. The officers sitting around the long table have been with him almost from the beginning of his command. They are beginning to show the stretch of the years.

As is he, he is all too aware.

Spock, his first officer, sits calmly at his usual place, a data pad on the table in front of him replacing the library computer console of the old days. His pose of relaxed alertness is peculiarly Vulcan. He is, like most Vulcans, lean and angular, with black shiny hair cut straight across his forehead and arching behind his elegantly pointed ears. Greenish light cast upward from his data pad gives him a more than usually satanic air. He is still relatively young by his race's reckoning, doomed to watch his human friends grow old before his eyes. But he is not untouched by time and care and experience. Here is a being who has been dead and brought back to life, who has seen more than almost any other of his race. His face is lined, like some cliff on his home world that has been etched and blasted by the fierce desert winds. His eyes, though, are still as curious and bright as when Kirk first met him.

Sitting next to Spock is Leonard McCoy, his chief medical officer. Along with Spock, he is one of Kirk's two closest friends. He is thinner and older—certainly older-looking—than Spock. His expression seems frozen in an attitude of benign cynicism. He looks to Kirk as if the years have whittled all superfluous mass from him, leaving him lean, but hale and vigorous, like an old tree with a strong, green heart.

Across the table is Montgomery Scott, *Enterprise*'s chief engineer. He is as jovially portly as the other two are thin and serious. When he was a young man, Scott was something of a firebrand, at least for an engineer, and not at all averse to a bottle of good Scotch whiskey or a good-looking member of the opposite sex. Even now, with the equanimity that comes with age, his fiery Scot nature still occasionally surfaces to "put the fear o' God" in any in his command who dares to displease him—most often by abusing his darlings, the machines and engines of the starship.

The other two officers seem the least touched by the passing years; but of course, they are younger. Nyota Uhura, the chief communications officer, is timeless, an ebony statue of classical beauty. She has matured rather than aged, Kirk thinks, giving up lithe sensuality for a stately, subdued elegance. Pavel Chekhov, the chief navigator, still looks boyish, even though he, too, served with the others on the original *Enterprise*. He is a skilled officer, despite the fact that there is almost a palpable air of mischief floating around him. Kirk can think of no one he would rather have at the navigation/fire control console in a tight spot, despite the fact that to look at him, you would think he would be more at home in the midst of *The Tempest*.

It is a companionable, a *comfortable* group. These officers have been together for so many years now that they seem like family to him, closer than his own family ever was. He has spent almost half his life working with, living with, and depending on these people. Spock and McCoy may be closer personal friends to him than the others, but they all have been close for many years. They have been together so long that they can anticipate each other's actions, a critical element of a well-oiled command mechanism. They have saved each others' lives and careers so many times that it would be pointless to try to list them all. In what could be a time of extreme danger for the Federation, not to mention the *Enterprise* and her crew, he is very glad to have all of them still with him.

Well, almost all of them are with him. The biggest change in the group is the absence of Hikiru Sulu, now with his own much-deserved command, the starship *Excelsior*. Kirk misses his sharply intelligent face at such a gathering, but he is glad that Sulu finally took the opportunity to command. Kirk has been watching his career from afar, and he has been very pleased with what he has seen so far. But he still misses his sure hand on the helm.

*Enterprise* still has no permanent chief helmsman, though Kirk has been trying to persuade an acquaintance from some time back, a Vulcan named Saavik, to take the post. Unfortunately, that looks daily less and less likely. He can't really blame her. *Enterprise*, for all her—and his—past glories, is no longer state-of-the-art. And serving with Captain—once Admiral—Kirk, is not necessarily the best route to a quick rise through the ranks. Conservative heads reign at Starfleet these days. It is a more bureaucratic service than in his youth. An aging maverick like Kirk is looked at askance now.

"Friends," he says, quickly glancing at Uhura, whose lips curve slowly up in just the tiniest of smiles. Some time back, when she could no longer take it, she gently pointed out the sexist nature of his habitual greeting, the archaic "gentlemen." Through tradition handed down from ancient navies, both male and female officers are usually referred to as "mister". He realizes, of

course, that that is sexist, too, but he can't really work up much feeling about it one way or another. It is just another facet of how his world works, a title the same as "lieutenant" or "commander." But to think that all these years, he had been making such a social gaffe without even the excuse of tradition... Well, he had been appalled.

"We have been assigned an urgent mission of a political nature," he continues. "There are indications that the planet Athena is planning to secede from the Federation."

"The university planet?" asks Chekhov, his Russian accent softening the "v." "I have a cousin studying there. That would be a shame."

"What do they expect us to do about it, Jim?" McCoy asks. "They can secede if they want to, can't they?"

"Any planet," Spock intones as if delivering a lecture, "has the legal right to secede from the Federation after due consideration of the prospect by its citizenry. The Federation is a voluntary union. Only a handful have seceded in the Federation's history, though even Vulcan considered doing so at one point in the not too distant past."

"I know, Spock," McCoy snaps, irritated. "I was there, remember?"

"Just prompting your memory, Doctor. Like Vulcan, Athena is a somewhat special case."

"So we're going to try to talk them out of it, too?"

Spock raises an eyebrow at this. The idea that humans had talked his race out of anything is apparently not one that he was willing to entertain. Or, at least, to admit.

"That's part of our mission, if possible," Kirk says. "But I'm afraid there's more. Athena University has a reputation throughout the Federation as an open, enlightened center of learning. But the planetary government is another matter. It's a dictatorship, run by the 'governor', a ruthless man named Giuseppe Ocht."

"Ocht was a revolutionary hero a long time ago. He organized a rebellion against an extremely repressive regime, eventually overthrowing them after a prolonged, bloody civil war. He was offered what was essentially kingship by the grateful people."

"An offer," Spock says, "that your own George Washington had the good grace to refuse."

"Yes. Ocht is no Washington, I'm afraid. And he's proven to be no better than the ones he replaced. He's a bully who maintains power by blackmail, extortion, assassination, repression. It's *his* decision to secede. There's not likely to be any public referendum on the subject, and if there were, it would undoubtedly be so manipulated as to be pointless. Even so, Federation diplomats tried to persuade him to put it to a vote. They were expelled."

"Athena University, though it plays a major role in the planet's economy and reputation in the rest of the Federation, is only one small part of the planet. Most of the planet has nothing to do with the university."

"From what I hear," McCoy says, "you wouldn't want to have much to do with the rest of the planet. Dirty, crime-ridden... Why the university was established there is beyond me."

"The university," says Spock, "was created shortly after Ocht consolidated his power base, if I recall correctly. It was a great surprise to most political analysts of the time."

“Indeed, Spock,” Kirk had spent some time after receiving his orders brushing up on Athena’s history. “Ocht took the old capital city’s center, razed most of what was still standing after the war, and transformed it into University City. Then he hired—well, bought, basically—some of the best professors in the Federation and heavily recruited good students. Get accepted to AU and you get a free ride: transport to Athena, tuition, room and board, even a generous stipend. Some of their programs, especially in graduate engineering, are second to none in the Federation.”

“So why’d he do it?” McCoy asks. “It had to be costly to set up, and it sounds like it’s still costly. Altruism doesn’t seem likely.”

“It was extremely costly. In fact, he almost bankrupted the planet doing it. He defended the expenditure, as much as he has to defend anything, on the grounds that he was investing in the planet’s future, that a great society is built on a firm foundation of learning.”

“Worthy reasons,” says Spock, “and it would seem he has been vindicated. Athena is by no means wealthy, but it has drawn a number of university-associated industries to the planet that more than pay for the university’s budget. Such industries are, I believe, of great interest to the Federation. Do I surmise correctly that our mission partly involves these?”

McCoy snorts derisively. “‘Associated industries’ my foot! You mean defense contractors. Everybody knows that most of the Federation’s weapons technology comes from Athena.”

“Yes, Doctor,” Spock replies calmly. “Many weapons companies find Athena’s government more amenable to deal with than other, more open societies. That and the propinquity of the university has encouraged a number of such companies to locate laboratories there. Even Starfleet has major research facilities there. Athena places high regard on weapons designers and weaponry; their planetary defenses are among the most formidable in the Federation. Which is propitious, as they are close to both the Klingon and Romulan neutral zones.” He turns to Kirk. “It would be logical for Starfleet Command to be concerned that advanced weapons technology could fall into hostile hands, should Athena be allowed to secede.”

“Exactly, Spock,” Kirk says. “They are especially worried about two new projects that are nearing completion, the Javelin phaser and the Protector shield projects.”

“Oh, aye!” Scott’s face brightens like a child’s at Christmas. “Those new beasties are supposed to make *Enterprise*’s phasers and shields look quaint. But I suppose they’ll have to shut them down now and move. It’s too bad, but it’d be nigh short of lunacy to continue on an independent planet right under the Klingon’s and Romulan’s noses, good planetary defenses or no.”

“That’s the main part of our mission, to make sure that the more sensitive projects are closed down and the information and personnel brought out,” says Kirk. “It’s more complicated than that, though. Starfleet now suspects that the university was set up in the first place solely to entice defense industries, looking forward to the day when Ocht could eventually secede and sell them off to the highest bidder. Recently, he closed off most travel to and from Athena on the pretext of a minor rebellion that is supposedly going on. Starfleet suspects that this was to keep any of the laboratories from moving away.”

“Federation monitoring buoys in the two Neutral Zones intercepted messages from Ocht to both the Klingons and the Romulans. We can’t decipher them. For all we know, they may have been just a signal, with nonsense content. But Starfleet fears the worst. It’s not just the secrets they’re worried about, but the personnel as well. They cannot be contacted. Ocht’s government assures us this is because they have been moved to ‘safe quarters’ to protect them from the rebels, and that they cannot permit contact for security reasons just now. But it is likely that Ocht intends to sell them, too.”

“Sell *people*, Captain?” Scott says, a slight burr betraying his agitation. “I canna believe he’d go that far. He’d have to be a monster.”

“Mr. Scott,” Spock says calmly, “I would remind you of the organized, government-sanctioned slave trade that existed on your world only a few hundred years ago.”

Scott colors. “I meant now, Mr. Spock! That was a long time ago.”

“Given that Ocht is unscrupulous,” Spock replies sedately, “and that he would greatly benefit from such a transaction, it is only logical that he would, indeed, sell them.”

McCoy stares incredulously at Spock, shaking his head. Kirk hears him mutter something about “cold-hearted.”

Spock looks around with mild curiosity. “I said it would be *logical*, Doctor, not that I condone such behavior. That would not be logical for *me*.”

“Our orders,” Kirk says, “are to do whatever we can to avert what could likely turn into a tragedy for everyone—the captured personnel, the Federation, and ultimately the people of Athena—if Starfleet is forced to defend its interests. We are to go there and do our best to prevent the personnel and secrets from falling into Romulan or Klingon hands. We are the nearest ship of the line with enough firepower to be convincing. Others will be sent as they can be freed up.

“Make no mistake, this could easily escalate into an outright war with the Klingons, the Romulans, or both—with us in the breach—unless we are extremely careful. I must also ask you to keep this to yourselves. Ocht has a very efficient intelligence apparatus. Starfleet suspects that he has infiltrated some of our ships, perhaps even the *Enterprise*.”

With the exception of Spock, the assembled officers look like someone has passed around shots of vinegar. The idea of a spy on the *Enterprise* rankles. For all the size of the crew, the ship is really more like a closed, small community composed of highly-trained, capable, *trustworthy* people. Each of the officers knows most of the crew at least by sight, if not personally. It is difficult to believe that some tin-pot dictator could possibly have infiltrated a Federation starship.

“There’s one more thing,” Kirk says with distaste. “We are to rendezvous with a mission specialist. While we are facing off with the Romulans and Klingons in orbit, and talking officially with Ocht’s government, he will be conducting operations on the surface. Technically, it’s his mission, and I’ve been ordered to offer him our complete cooperation.”

“‘Mission specialist,’ ” McCoy snaps. “What is this, euphemism week? Why can’t Starfleet just come right out and say ‘spy’? Jim, those kind of people give me the creeps. I don’t like this at all.”

“Doctor McCoy,” Spock says in a tone generally reserved for small, rather slow children, “that is an irrational attitude. Even on Vulcan, where personal integrity is highly regarded, espionage has often proven necessary. Governments do not, possibly cannot, operate openly on all counts. Human governments are particularly prone to problems in this regard, composed as they are of humans.”

McCoy visibly bristles and starts to reply, but Kirk adroitly interrupts. The last thing he needs right now is yet another verbal sparring match between his two friends. The others have taken no offense; it was clear to all whom Spock was baiting.

“There’s something in what you say, I’m sure, Spock, but you’re right, too, Bones. Our guest, no matter what his or her papers say, will be what is termed in polite company an ‘operative.’ I don’t like it, either. But we’ll just have to make the best of it.

“There’s something else you should know about the mission specialist, and this isn’t to leave this room. He is not just going to Athena to gather information or to find and hopefully free the personnel. If worse comes to worst, the Federation deems this a serious enough matter that the operative—and us, too, for that matter—may be ordered to interfere in the internal affairs of what will shortly become a sovereign government.”

He pauses to let that sink in. If there is one thing in the Federation’s secular nature that approaches the sacred, it is the policy of non-interference. Violation of that policy carries some of the severest penalties of any crime. To order operatives and starship captains to violate it would require extreme concern, or possibly fear.

If word of it ever leaked out, some Federation planets might begin to think that the Federation, and Earth in particular, was getting entirely too powerful. They might begin to worry about their own rights.

The intercom whistles.

“Kirk here.”

“Captain,” says the officer of the deck, “a very small ship just approached at high warp and is now matching our speed. It has a Federation diplomatic transponder signature, with the name *Shelley*, but there seems to be no record of the ship in the computer. Its captain says you are expecting him. He sends his compliments and requests we bring his ship aboard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Nguyen. Please convey my compliments to the ship’s captain and bring his ship into the shuttle bay.”

“Aye, sir.”

Kirk sighs. “Well,” he says, rising. “Shall we go meet the spook?”

## Chapter Two

Flynn, in the cockpit of his little ship, watches as it is pulled in by *Enterprise*'s tractor beams. The other ship just keeps getting larger and larger, until it fills the entire viewport. His perspective changes. Now, instead of approaching another ship, he is orbiting some oddly-shaped minor planet. Gravity or no gravity, down is most definitely toward the starship.

He approached from the port side. Now the tractor beams haul *Shelley* past the huge saucer-shaped primary hull, diagonally down the strut connecting the vaguely-cylindrical secondary hull to the port warp nacelle, and finally along the length of the secondary hull. Then the beams swing *Shelley* out and aft, turn it around, and pull it in, like a sea anemone's tentacles placing food in its mouth. Flynn finds the simile a little disquieting, especially when the gigantic clamshell doors sweep majestically open to reveal the maw of a cavernous shuttle bay.

He has been this close to *Constitution*-class ships before. Now, as always, he feels like a savage confronted with some massive technological undertaking hopelessly beyond his ken, like he is seeing the product of magic. The first true spaceship he ever saw was a colony ship, one of the early ones, and it was gigantic. Peeping out from the cargo bay of the shuttle where he'd stowed away, that ship filled his visor, filled his view no matter which way he turned—shiny, modern, huge.

That ship, if it still existed, would rattle around in *Enterprise*'s secondary hull.

He sighs.

*Humans just aren't wired for longevity*, he thinks.

It shows up at times like these, when you are faced with the indisputable fact that technology's inexorable march has left the time in which you were born in the dust.

"*Shelley*," he says aloud, "secure for docking. Landing. Whatever. We'll be aboard for a while, so if there's maintenance that needs to be done, do it. But we may have to leave in a hurry."

"Aye, Flynn, understood."

The ship's voice is melodious, masculine. Most computer voices are kept carefully non-human to reduce the human tendency to attribute more intelligence to them than is warranted. *Shelley* is different; its voice could be that of a news announcer.

"I'll keep her warmed up for you."



From inside the shuttle bay, the operative's ship is at first not visible through the parting doors. All that the widening gap reveals is the blackness of space, interrupted only by pinprick stars that twinkle prettily as random fluctuations sweep through the field keeping the air in. Then, suddenly, bathed in a faint blue glow from the tractor beams, a thin, winged dart drops over the top rim of the open doorway. It is barely twice as large as a shuttlecraft.

The force field bends viscously around the little craft, then stretches, finally sweeping back cleanly along the ship's flanks to snap once again into place. The tractor beams set the ship gently on a turntable in the center of the shuttle bay. The clamshell doors ponderously close.

“Shuttle bay secure,” the computer’s mechanically-feminine voice informs the three people waiting as the doors clang shut. “Air pressure at one atmosphere and steady. Gravity normal.”

Kirk, Spock, and McCoy have been waiting impatiently on the other side of a hatch into the shuttle bay. At least, Kirk and McCoy have been; Spock has been looking like a Vulcan statue or a Zen master. Now they enter and walk briskly toward the newcomer’s ship.

On its bow is hand-painted the name “Shelley” in flowing cursive script. Behind the name is a pretty good rendition of a spooky moonlit castle.

Kirk looks at the name, looks at Spock, who lifts an eyebrow in reply.

The ship is sleek, with elegant lines. It looks more like an aircraft than a spaceship. The stubby wings start about a third of the way down the fuselage and are sharply swept back into a shape resembling a curving delta. The tail is also triangular. There is even what looks like an old-style exhaust port at the stern, though it is the ship’s impulse drive rather than the business end of some antique jet engine. Kirk almost expects to see the craft sitting on landing gear, but, like his own ship’s shuttles, it rests on its warp engine pods. Unlike the shuttles, though, this ship’s skin extends from the fuselage proper to envelope the warp engines, giving it a sleeker look and undoubtedly making it more aerodynamic.

The ship could easily be a *very* rich person’s plaything, a yacht. But anyone who might make more than a casual inspection would notice subtle clues to its true nature. Bulges blemish the sleek streamlining here and there. Sensors? Shield generators? Weapons? The warp engines are larger than they should be for a normal yacht—as if the speed with which *Shelley* caught *Enterprise* was not clue enough to the ship’s abilities.

The ship’s skin is different-looking as well, with a depth and apparent plasticity that is almost organic. Chameleonskin. Kirk, at least, recognizes it. A crude but effective, low-energy visual cloaking device. Tiny field generators are embedded in the skin, capable of working together to project a field that can refract light around the vehicle, effectively imitating the negative index of refraction of advanced materials, but tunable. Only capable of working in a small range of frequencies at once, but if you know how whomever is trying to see you is looking for you, you gain fairly cheap invisibility.

A crack appears in *Shelley*’s seamless side as a door slides back into the hull. A stairway extends slowly to touch the shuttle bay’s floor with a dull clang, and a man steps to the top of the ramp and gazes at them speculatively.



Flynn knows what they are seeing. After all, he created it: his “default appearance”, as he likes to think of it. A tall, slenderly muscular man, yet unprepossessing. Black hair neatly trimmed and parted, neither too short nor too long for current fashion. Clean cut. Civilian clothes, not too conservative, but not too daring, either: tan faux-woolen trousers, light blue cotton shirt, white jacket opened informally, sensible brown shoes.

Non-threatening. Nondescript.

The others have reached the bottom of the ramp now. Crewmen are re-entering the bay and continuing their tasks, occasionally glancing curiously toward *Shelley*. Kirk motions, and a boatswain hurries over to pipe Flynn aboard on her little electronic pipe.

Flynn had holos of them in the dossiers he studied en route, but he did little more than glance at them. These three, after all, are famous, and not just at Starfleet Command.

The man in front, his bearing and demeanor almost making the captain's pips and stripes superfluous, is Kirk. Highly decorated, a real live hero of the Federation. Made captain youngest of anyone in Starfleet, though he's now getting on a bit in years. Impulsive, but strategically and tactically brilliant. A maverick, not easily controlled, with little respect for authority per se—he has been broken from the rank of admiral, after all, though that was apparently more at his request than otherwise—but with great respect for what the authority is supposed to be in service of. He and his crew have literally saved the Federation on more than one occasion.

Flynn has been looking forward to meeting him for a long time. He has been what would have been called in his youth a fan of Kirk's for years, following his exploits with interest, almost as if Kirk were a hero in some novel. Whenever he returned home from a mission, he made it a point to get the latest news about him.

He envies Kirk and others like him. Starship captains. Men and women like Kirk are able to live, if not normal lives, at least lives that allow them to speak openly about what they do, to have friends, to have a family. How different from his life.

Sometimes, in the long boredom of interstellar travel, he allows himself the indulgence of forgetting who and what he is, and at times like that, he thinks that maybe he would have made a good starship captain. But his destiny—such as it is—was decided for him long before he ever reached the age of consent.

He supposes that he was half expecting Kirk to be some sort of bronzed god, a superman. Maybe Kirk from the pictures he remembers from fifteen years ago, when he first started taking an interest in his career. That Kirk would have probably already have told him exactly what he thought of spies—Flynn has no doubt that the opinion would be a low one—and would have made the ground rules clear even before piping him aboard. That Kirk, after all, had, for a week or more after being commandeered to guard a quadrotriticale shipment, amused himself by insulting the highest ranking Federation official present for wasting his time.

But the person at the foot of the ramp is not what he expected. The arrogant demeanor is still there, but seemingly just from habit. Here is no marblesque hero, but rather the legend made flesh, and middle-aged, tired-looking flesh at that, slight paunch and all. Kirk looks so *old*, lines verging on wrinkles rumpling his face, as if each of his adventures left a record there. And he looks *stuffy*, of all things, admiral-like, though not an admiral in rank.

Try as he might, Flynn cannot suppress a momentary sharp stab of disappointment.

Not so disappointing is the tall Vulcan beside him, Spock. An extraordinary individual even by Vulcan standards. Half-human, due to a feat of genetic engineering done, it has been speculated, as much for human–Vulcan relations as for the parents. Accomplished scientist, decorated first officer—very possibly the finest officer in the fleet. He has refused promotion

after promotion to remain with Kirk, though it is not clear if Kirk knows exactly how many. *I'm sure*, thinks Flynn, *that he has a very logical reason for having done that*. He, too, has a lined visage, but to him it gives an air of vast experience, maturity, wisdom.

The third man is McCoy, thin, sardonic, a brilliant clinician and researcher with pretensions of being “just an ol’ country doctor.” He has known Kirk longest of anyone aboard. He seems to function, at least according to the reports, as a kind of de facto third in command. Very humane, very sensitive underneath the crustiness.

*He's not going to like me*, Flynn thinks wryly.

Flynn knows that these are just the tip of an iceberg. Kirk has surrounded himself with Starfleet’s finest, though not through any ambitions of empire-building. No, Kirk is—or was, at least—a fine captain, naturally charismatic, a born leader. In his prime, the best officers in Starfleet used to line up for a chance to serve under him.

“Permission to come aboard, Captain,” Flynn asks.

His voice is like his appearance, pleasant but carefully unrememberable. *A spy's voice*.

“Granted,” Kirk says gruffly. “Welcome aboard. I assume you are Captain Flynn. Commodore Flynn while aboard, of course. This is my first officer, Mr. Spock, and my chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy. I’m Captain James Kirk.”

“Pleased to meet you all,” he says, descending the gangway. “I’ve heard a lot about you.” He has good hearing; good enough, anyway, to catch McCoy’s muttered “I’ll bet you have.” He permits himself a ghost of a smile.

There is an awkward silence. He finds himself at a loss for what to say, something that is very rare for him these days. Over time, he has changed, *evolved* would perhaps be a better word, from an instrument for his original purpose into a true spy, usually socially competent, certainly facile enough with words. But finally meeting Kirk, and his disappointment in what he has found, has him momentarily flustered. The others do not seem eager to talk to him.

“What is our ETA?” he asks finally, more to have something to say than anything else.

“A little over two weeks at our present speed,” Kirk replies.

That seems long. “Which is?”

“Warp six.”

Without thinking, he says, “Increase to warp eight; that will cut our time down to a week.”

For a moment, Kirk bristles. Flynn’s tone, though bland, left no doubt that it was an order, and Kirk is not used to being ordered about on his own ship. Flynn can see him force himself to relax.

Kirk shrugs slightly.

“Very well,” he says, but stiffly.

*Damn*, Flynn thinks. He did not mean to be so peremptory. He is used to working alone, giving Shelley orders without thinking. Not a very good first impression, and to apologize would be perceived as weak—or worse, as patronizing.

*Ah, well*. He doesn’t have to be liked, just effective.

“Spock,” Kirk says, “show Commodore Flynn to his quarters, then escort him to the conference room. Flynn, I’d like to speak with you as soon as you stow your gear.”

Kirk turns and walks out without waiting for a reply.

❖

“Warp eight for a *week*, Cap’n?” Scott asks incredulously. He looks as outraged as if Kirk had just questioned his mother’s ancestry. “It’ll nae be verra good for the engines, I’ll tell ye that!”

“I have faith in your engines, Scotty,” Kirk says. He and most of his officers are sitting around the conference table again, waiting for Flynn and Spock. “Wave your usual magic wand and keep ‘em humming along.”

“Groanin’ along will be more like it toward the end o’ the week.” He glares at Kirk for a second longer, but then shakes his head. He has had this same conversation with his captain a hundred times, and he has yet to win the argument. “But aye, sir, I’ll do me best.”

The door swishes open. Kirk turns expectantly, but Spock walks in alone.

“Mr. Spock,” he says. “Where is our guest?”

“He...instructed me,” Spock says, raising an eyebrow in what could have been an expression of irritation, “to go on ahead. He said he had something to take care of in his cabin of a confidential nature, and that he would be here soon.”

“Hmph,” is all Kirk can manage. Without being profane, that is.

McCoy just grunts and says, “Imperious, isn’t he?”

Kirk permits himself a smile. “While we’re waiting, Spock,” he says, “see if you can find any information about him. If we’re effectively going to be under his command on this mission, I want to know who we’re dealing with.”

Spock’s fingers fly over his pad for a few moments. The shifting glow from the screen underlights his face. He looks up. “No information available on either Flynn or *Shelley*, Captain. Several queries did, however, reveal gaps in the computer’s knowledge base marked ‘security deletion.’”

Kirk is puzzled by Spock’s expression of mild surprise. Highly-secret information is routinely deleted from data downloaded to ships unless the captain has some need to know.

“So?” he asks.

“What is unusual about the gaps, Captain,” Spock says, arching his eyebrows in what for him is almost an extreme display of emotion, “is that many of them are in data about events occurring more than a century ago.”

“What? Are you telling me that Flynn...?”

He breaks off as the door opens. Flynn enters, giving him a curious look. “That Flynn is what, Captain?”

“That Flynn is finally here,” Kirk finishes, glaring at him. He motions brusquely to an empty chair and introduces the officers Flynn hasn’t met yet. Flynn is polite, nodding to them in turn, but frowns.

“This is a sensitive mission, Captain,” he says, turning to Kirk, “as you know.” He addresses the others. “I wish to speak to Kirk and Spock in private. The rest of you are dismissed.”

No one moves. Scott looks like someone has just slapped him and he is considering returning the favor. Uhura and Chekhov exchange astonished glances. McCoy glares at Flynn as if he is some strange and rather slimy new form of life. Spock adopts a somewhat sardonic air.

“I assure you, Flynn,” Kirk says when he trusts his voice, “that you have no need to worry. Of course I’m aware of the sensitivity of the mission. But these people are my senior staff, and they need to know what we are getting ourselves into as much as I do.”

Flynn’s voice remains firm. “Captain, your orders were quite clear about the need for secrecy. And with respect to my authority.”

“You are on *my* ship now, *Mr.* Flynn,” Kirk growls, “and while that is the case, *my* authority is absolute with respect to decisions about how to run. If you don’t like that, I suggest you either complain to Starfleet, find yourself another ship, or better yet, both.”

Flynn glares at him. “And may I remind you, Captain, that this briefing is part of *my* mission and not part of the running of your ship.”

“They are as trustworthy as you or I. Surely you don’t think there’s a spy in this room...” He trails off, realizing exactly what it is he has said.

Flynn, rather infuriatingly, suddenly grins.

“Could be, Captain,” he says, “could be.” He sighs. “But you misinterpret my concern. I don’t mistrust your senior officers. We’ve investigated them rather carefully.”

Some of them shift in their seats; McCoy looks quietly outraged. Spock is, of course, unperturbed; Kirk assumes he thinks it only a logical precaution, and he would be right.

“They are all clean,” he continues, “as you know. But the fewer who know the details of the mission, the less chance for inadvertent leaks to others on board who might not be so...trustworthy.”

Kirk continues to stare fixedly at him. “They stay, Flynn.”

Flynn sighs again.

“Oh, very well, Captain, if you insist and accept responsibility. We can’t argue about it all the way to Athena.”

“Fine,” Kirk says brusquely.

Flynn makes a placating gesture with his hand, then addresses them all.

“The mission from your perspective is rather simple. Your job is to get me to Athena as quickly as possible and to act as cover or diversion, whichever is necessary, while I carry out my part of the mission. My job is to go down to the surface undetected and rescue the Starfleet personnel, destroy any secret documents Ocht may have, and, if possible, stop the secession.”

There is silence for a moment, replete with stunned looks.

“Just like that?” Kirk finally says. He couldn’t have kept the sarcasm out of his voice if had tried, and he didn’t try too hard. “All by yourself, a one-man rescue squad?”

Flynn smiles wryly.

“Just like that,” he says. “I’m pretty good at my job. But not all by myself, not really—I’m not *that* good. There is an intelligence network already in place. I’ll coordinate their actions—assuming Ocht hasn’t already wiped them out. The plan I have will also require a few volunteers

from your crew. With luck, we'll be in and out quickly with the Starfleet people, then the diplomats can clean up."

He leans forward, puts his forearms on the table, clasps his hands together.

"If we fail, though, you and the other starships will have to make sure that my failure doesn't cost the Federation a great deal more than just one spy and the taxes of one of its members. We have reliable information from an operative on Athena that the Javelin phaser is much nearer to being operational than we thought. It's even possible it *is* operational. That thing can pierce a starship's shields like an ice pick through cloth."

Kirk decides not to ask how Flynn knows the details of such a secret project.

"The operative, before she was captured and tortured to death, also found evidence of other weapons under development that make the Javelin look like a toy. If the Klingons or Romulans get their hands on the Javelin, or the others..."

The thought is disturbing, but Kirk is far more chilled by Flynn's casual dismissal of another operative's gruesome death, like he was discussing the weather or a sports event. Where was the concern for another human being?

Kirk understands battlefield thinking, people reduced to expendable units to be deployed and used. He understands it, is good at it, but doesn't like it.

*Is that what life is to a spy?* he wonders. One long, slow, mostly uneventful battle, with everyone, all the time, reduced to inhuman abstractions?

"I'm curious," drawls McCoy. "Just how do you and your cronies intend to stop this secession, anyway? The tried and true methods of spies? Thievery, blackmail, maybe a little assassination just for good measure—you know, to keep your hand in?"

Kirk is surprised. He had not realized that McCoy was this angry. Maybe it's Flynn bossing them around like flunkies, or maybe McCoy just doesn't like spies. Whatever it is, the doctor is seething.

For a second, Flynn's cool demeanor wavers. Perhaps McCoy hit a sensitive spot? Immediately, though, a cruel smile slips into place like armor to cover the breach.

"Now, now, Doctor," he says, playing it rather broadly. "You don't call me dirty names and I'll not call you a quack. Those 'tried and true' methods are archaic, rather like performing surgery with a metal scalpel. There are better, cleaner ways, but I'll admit they are sometimes unavailable.

"Or would leeches be a metaphor with which you are more conversant?"

"Gentlemen, please," Kirk interjects as McCoy is winding up to say something sure to be really nasty. McCoy is quite good at that, he knows from long experience and, as much fun as it would be to watch the fur fly, he doesn't really want to waste time or antagonize Flynn for no real reason.

He stares warily at the doctor until he is sure that, if not exactly willing to let it pass, he will subside for now.

"Flynn, how do you intend to get through the planetary defenses? I doubt if the *Enterprise* can do that, and I don't think Ocht will just throw open the palace doors for us."

“As the good doctor has suggested, Captain, tricks of the trade. I won’t discuss the details unnecessarily—I do draw the line there—but *Shelley* has some unusual abilities that will be helpful.”

“The chameleonskin won’t fool Ocht’s people for long,” Kirk points out.

“You noticed that, eh?” Flynn says. “No, it wouldn’t. That’s just for long-term, low-level invisibility. The ship can do better.”

“A cloaking device?” Spock asks, sounding interested. “It is my understanding that Federation policy regarding cloaking devices...”

“Now, Mr. Spock, I wouldn’t want to ruin a surprise,” Flynn says. “You’ll just have to wait and see.”

He glances down at his wrist. It takes Kirk a few seconds to realize that the unusual bracelet he is wearing is an ancient chronometer of some sort.

“Now, Captain, I really must insist on seeing you in private. We need to finalize some plans, and I would feel more comfortable with just the two of us here, regardless of how much we trust your officers.”

Kirk cannot really deny the legitimacy of the request, and it was phrased nicely enough.

“As you wish,” he says. At his nod, the other get up and file out.

As the door opens, Lieutenant Jean O’Connor is walking by, intent on a data pad she is carrying. She glances up and steps to the side to let the officers by, then looks into the conference room with idle curiosity.

She sees Flynn. He sees her and freezes, mouth open in an almost comical portrait of surprise.

There are no sonic deadeners in the corridor to stifle her scream of abject terror. She slumps unconscious to the floor.

# Chapter Three

*Enterprise's* sickbay is designed to be both utilitarian and comforting, and the two goals subtly manifest their conflicting natures in every aspect of the suite of rooms. Soft indirect lighting almost overcome by flashing monitors over the beds. The hush produced by sound-deadening carpet and wall coverings interrupted by unsettling beeps, chirps, and moans from unseen machinery. And everywhere, the dim but still tangy odor of disinfectant, a hallmark of doctors for centuries.

Beds are arrayed around the room, narrow padded platforms, mostly empty. On one of them, Jean O'Connor is only now regaining consciousness, a thin blanket covering her to the neck. She is very pale. McCoy, Kirk, and Spock stand around her.

Flynn stands back, out of her line of sight, biting his lower lip and frowning. He insisted on accompanying them to sickbay over McCoy's vehement protests, refusing to answer all questions en route.

"There, there, Lieutenant," McCoy murmurs as he pats her hand. His gruffness has mellowed; now he's the doting father, the concerned uncle, the caring doctor. "You're just fine, you just had a little fainting spell, that's all."

She looks embarrassed, but manages a wan smile. Then she sees Kirk.

"Captain," she says, blushing deeply, "I'm so sorry, it was so unprofessional."

Kirk smiles reassuringly. O'Connor is fairly new on board. He can imagine what she feels like. Probably scared enough just having to talk to him, let alone right after behavior he doubts jibes with her idea of how a security officer behaves.

As gently as he can, he says, "It's all right, Lieutenant. Could have happened to anyone. But can you tell me what upset you so much?"

"It's so silly, really. I've just been having these dreams lately, and for a second when I looked into the conference room, I thought I saw a mon...a..." She visibly shudders.

Kirk glances up at Spock, who shrugs slightly. "That you saw a what, Lieutenant?"

She shakes her head, looking simultaneously frightened and even more embarrassed.

Flynn shifts slightly. His clothing rustles enough to make a slight sound, causing O'Connor to look around. Catching sight of him, she gasps sharply.

"A monster," he says quietly, sadly, when he notices she has seen him. His voice is strangely choked-sounding, like he is feeling some echo of a distant pain. "You thought you saw a monster, didn't you, Jean?"

She blanches, her high color draining as if someone had opened a plug, or perhaps a vein. Her eyes widen and she scrambles backward, away from him, almost climbing McCoy. "No, no, don't let him get me..."

"Damn you!" McCoy hisses at Flynn as he presses a hypo to her neck. She slumps, and he lays her gently back onto the table. "What are you trying to do, send her into shock? Get the hell out of my sickbay!"

"A monster?" Kirk says. "What...?"

He is too bewildered to pay much attention to either McCoy or O'Connor. He rounds on Flynn.

“How did you know her name? Flynn, do you want to tell me what the hell is going on here?”

Flynn sighs and shakes his head ruefully.

“No, Captain, I do not, not at all. But I don’t suppose I have much choice, do I?”

❖

“I met her when I was on a mission, a long time ago. She was just a child then.”

Kirk glances questioningly at Spock, who raises an eyebrow, but says nothing. Flynn looks only a few years older than O’Connor, if that. Kirk thinks of hundred year-old gaps in the ship’s records.

The three of them and McCoy are in a small conference room off the sickbay, a cramped, austere compartment furnished with only a plain white table, three white chairs, and a computer station. McCoy just arrived after giving his colleague, Dr. Christine Chapel, instructions to watch O’Connor’s condition. He still glares at Flynn.

“I killed her father,” Flynn says simply, without emotion. They stare at him. He raises his eyes, stares defiantly at each of them in turn. “He was a traitor to the Federation,” he says defensively.

“So you just killed him, that it?” McCoy flares. “Judge, jury, executioner and spy—how *versatile!*”

“Of course not, dammit!” Flynn growls. For just a second, the others get a glimpse beneath the façade: anger, dangerous anger, but also, maybe, pain. Then he quickly regains control, becomes bland again. “I had no choice, Doctor. He was trading secrets to the Klingons.

“That time it was detailed plans and other secret information about *Constitution*-class starships. He was a computer expert. He had broken into a high-security system on Earth via the subspace Internet; we barely detected the theft. When I finally located him, he was about to beam up to a cloaked Klingon vessel in orbit around his planet. I broke into his house and barged into the living room. I wanted to capture him, but the transporter effect had already started.”

Flynn’s expression becomes distant. “I knew that with the Klingons locked onto him, I couldn’t knock him out of the beam, and just incapacitating him would do no good; they’d just revive him on board to tell them where the plans were. Grabbing him would only get me a free trip to the Klingon ship. I could have killed the five or six Klingons that would likely have been in the transporter room, but before I could have beamed back down, others would probably have killed me—I was unarmed. So I did the only thing I could under the circumstances. I jumped through the beam, broke his neck.. His body disappeared, then, a moment later, reappeared. Dead traitors are useless to everyone.”

The sheer emotionless way he tells it takes Kirk aback, though he can’t really say if it is the killing that he confessed to or the incredible feat he claimed he could do that is the most astounding. Killing five or six Klingons? With his bare hands? *Yeah, right.*

“And how does O’Connor know about this?” he asks.

“Because, Captain, when I turned around to leave, there she was. A five-year old child, terrified out of her wits, who had seen the whole thing.

“And no, McCoy, before you ask, I’m *not* proud of that little episode. Her father kisses her goodbye, contacts his friends and waits for them to beam him up. Then a stranger bursts in and kills him. But the Federation’s interests come first, always; even if I’d seen her, I would have done the same thing.

“I later recovered the information he intended to sell. It would have cost a lot of lives if the Klingons had gotten their hands on it, possibly even yours—*Enterprise* is a *Constitution*-class ship, after all.”

“She was about to call you ‘monster,’ ” muses Spock, “and you anticipated it. May I ask how?”

Flynn looks uncomfortable. “Mr. Spock, she is human, not Vulcan. If someone kills another person’s parent in front of them for no reason they can fathom, would they need any more cause to think him a monster? She called me that at the time; it made sense she’d call me that again.”

*Something doesn’t ring true*, thinks Kirk. Flynn is hiding something; there’s more to that “monster” business than that.

“Surely,” Spock continues, as if solving a particularly interesting puzzle, “Lt. O’Connor would have changed her opinion by now. She is after all an adult, and surely accepts the reasons for your actions, intellectually if not emotionally.”

“Possibly,” Flynn admits slowly, looking down, “you would be right. Except no one ever told her about her father. I certainly didn’t at the time, and no one else ever did, either. It’s not something you tell a child. ‘Oh, by the way, honey, your father was a traitor, so I had to kill him —you understand.’ No, Mr. Spock, she doesn’t know.”

“That seems...ill-advised. Unpalatable truth is often less difficult and dangerous in the long run than even well-intentioned falsehood.”

Flynn looks for a moment like he is about to argue, or at least object to the homily, but doesn’t. He brings his hands up and cups his face in a gesture of weariness, drawing them down till they are together in front of his lips, as if in prayer.

“I suspect, Mr. Spock, that in this case you are right.”

He drops his hands limply to the table, shakes his head.

“So.” Kirk turns to look at Flynn. “Who tells her now—you or me?”

“If she would listen to me, I guess I should. But I doubt that would be wise.”

“You, my friend,” McCoy says in anything but a friendly tone, “are not going anywhere near that woman, if I have to sedate you and strap you to a bed.”



“Lieutenant,” Kirk greets her when the door finally opens. Jean stands just beyond the doorway with a blue terrycloth robe wrapped tight around her. Her face is puffy, though Kirk would be hard-pressed to say if it is from sleep or crying, and her curly hair is mussed and tangled.

“Captain!” Her confusion is obvious. “Come in,” she says, more a question than a polite invitation. She steps back.

The door swishes shut behind him.

*How do I do this?* runs through his mind. He has had to tell innumerable loved ones of crew and officers that they would not be coming home again. It never gets easy, but he knows by now how to approach the task. But this, this is new territory.

She offers coffee, nervously; he declines, politely.

The lights are dim, but even so he can see the rumpled bed, some wadded tissues on the floor beside it.

Where do you go, what do you do when a monster from your childhood is somewhere on your ship? You retreat to your cabin, he supposes, and hope that the thing won’t come looking for you.

If it were him, he would be armed, just in case; he wonders about the contents of her robe’s pockets. The one on the right—she’s right-handed, he thinks—is it bulging with more tissues or with a phaser? She is security, after all; access to weapons lockers is controlled, but she could get around that. He could ask her, of course; but that’s hardly the right tone, given the situation.

*The spy will have to fend for himself*, he thinks.

“Jean,” he begins, hoping to set an informal and trusting tone. He again feels out of his depth. He has told far too many people unpleasant news. But this... Apologizing for the killer? “I know it was a nasty shock, seeing Flynn aboard *Enterprise*.”

“Flynn,” she says, hatred raw in her voice. “So that’s his name. What is he *doing* here? Why isn’t he in prison? Captain, that man killed my father in cold blood. Can’t you *do* something?”

“Jean, you have to listen to me now, though what I’m going to say isn’t going to be pleasant. And this must remain confidential. Flynn is a Federation spy. We are en route to try to clear up a *very* touchy situation; he is in command of the mission. He was a spy...then...too.”

“A spy?” she says, her anger fighting with her confusion. “Then why did he kill Father?” She frowns for a moment, then almost shouts: “No! Father wasn’t involved in anything like that, he was a professor at the university!”

“I’m afraid that your father was selling secret information to the Klingons. He had been doing it for years. He was trying to smuggle secrets to them when he died. Flynn had to stop him, and the only way, unfortunately, was to kill him. I’m sorry to have to tell you this.”

She looks as if he had slapped her. “I don’t believe it! My father wouldn’t have done anything like that. I don’t believe it, it’s a lie by that monster!”

“I really wish it was that easy,” he says, shaking his head. “Then I could just lock him up and be done with it. But I contacted Starfleet. Your father had broken into computers at half a dozen secure installations, then sold minor secrets. They had suspected him for a long time. This time, they intercepted his message when he contacted the Klingons. Flynn was the case officer.” Without thinking, he says, “He got a commendation.” Instantly, he feels like kicking himself, but there’s no way to draw the words back into his mouth.

Her face hardens, the confused softness of a moment ago evaporating to reveal anger cold as stone. “A *commendation*,” she sneers. “For killing my father. Well, well. I guess if my mother hadn’t been dead already, he could have killed her too and gotten a fucking medal!”

“Lieutenant,” he says warily, trying to remind her to whom she is talking without snapping at her, and being only partially successful. She seems not to notice.

“I sympathize with your loss. I don’t like spies any more than you do, especially not this one. But this mission is vital to the Federation, and I will *not* jeopardize it for your personal feelings, no matter how justified. You are a professional; I need you to act like it. I want your word as a Starfleet officer that you won’t interfere with Flynn or his work.”

She glares at him for a long moment.

“All right,” she says finally, quietly. He feels the rage behind her cold eyes, a rage of such intensity that beside it their difference in rank seems inconsequential.

“I’ll stay away from the spy. But you see that he damn well stays away from me. Traitor or not, he was my father, and I won’t forgive that bastard for killing him. If he comes near me, so help me God you’ll need another spy.”

It is all he can do to keep from taking a step backward. “Understood, Lieutenant,” he acquiesces.

He turns to leave, then faces her again.

“One other thing. Why exactly did you call him a monster?”

In the turbolift, he leans wearily against the wall. He is not as young as he used to be. That little encounter has left him feeling like he’s been on a forced march.

“Bridge,” he says, and the lift begins moving. He has a bad feeling about this whole situation, a very bad feeling.

Jean’s answer to his question keeps running through his mind. She was five, after all, he tells himself, not for the first time. Fear and inexperience with such things would explain it. He hopes.

# Chapter Four

Flynn practices kata, something that always clears his mind. The formal motion and rhythm, the non-analytic concentration are soothing. It is balm for a mind troubled by too much scheming, too many memories, too many ghosts—and more than he would like on his conscience.

He kicks an imaginary opponent, smoothly withdraws his leg into the next movement, caught up in the flow of form. His gi snaps as he moves, a crisp, popping sound.

The “gym” is really a section of the main shuttle bay that has been cleared and marked off for recreation. Blue mats cover this section, the section given over to gymnastics, martial arts, and the like. Elsewhere, a very real-seeming wooden floor has replaced the featureless plasteel of the hangar deck to form a ball court. Tricks with nanotechnology, another technology that was only fantasy in his youth. Only this section of the hangar is lit, and that from high above, giving the space something of the feel of a cathedral.

A few people are milling around the gym, watching. He is good, but he knows it’s not appreciation for his skill that draws them. Even a large ship such as this one is still a small community. People pick up nuances in others’ behavior, hear things through the grapevine that every ship has.

Probably none of the crew apart from the handful of officers he has met actually know exactly what it is he has done, but that doesn’t mean that they don’t all know that somehow he is persona non grata as far as those officers are concerned. He can feel the dislike as a palpable thing hanging in the gym’s air.

He went back to his quarters yesterday after the fiasco in sickbay to mull over what had happened. Later, he went to the officers’ mess for dinner, only to find himself the only one at his table—even though there had been three other people there when he had sat down. They had pointedly gotten to their feet and moved to other tables.

Today, he has taken his meals in his quarters.

With an effort, he dismisses the watching crew from his mind, concentrating instead on not concentrating, on the tranquility to be had in the silent poetry of motion. An old haiku he heard during training, so many years ago, by a master (unfortunately of martial arts, not poetry) now bubbles to his consciousness:

Mantis in summer—

sits so still, so calm.

Deadly peacefulness!

The master was trying to get him to fight without thinking, both untriggered and—especially—triggered.

*A mantis*, he thinks. As if a mantis ever fights. No, she just lurks, hidden in plain sight, then lunges to kill, even the ones she loves.

*How like a spy.*



“Commodore Flynn!” someone shouts from the door to the locker rooms, drawing him back reluctantly into the gym’s reality from the inner space where he had been floating. It is Kirk, wearing maroon sweatpants and a matching baggy sweatshirt, with a towel around his neck. “You look like a man in need of a sparring partner.”

Flynn feels himself tense, tries to maintain the rhythm, but it is futile, and he knows it.

“No thank you, Captain,” he says, hoping he is not rejecting what could be a peace offering.

He knows he got off to a bad enough start with Kirk, even before that business with Jean. Since then, Kirk has studiously avoided him. For his part, he has not sought out companionship, nor has he attempted to explain himself further to Kirk. Over the long years, he has grown used to solitude, even in the midst of a crowded starship.

He moves into the next stance.

“Come on, it’ll do you good,” Kirk insists.

Is there a note of brittleness beneath Kirk’s banter?

Kirk walks over and tosses the towel onto the floor.

“Or are you afraid an old starship captain might hurt you in a *fair* fight?”

Flynn stops and sighs, then stands up out of the stance.

“Captain, are you baiting me?”

“Baiting you, Flynn? No, I’m trying to be friendly.”

But it sounds false to Kirk’s own ears, suddenly.

*Why am I doing this?* he wonders. He came down here just to work out; he did not know that Flynn was here.

Despite his age, he is still in excellent physical shape. He has always been surprisingly strong and agile; he still is. Flynn undoubtedly has been well-trained, but then, so are starship captains. Flynn showed nice form in kata, but that means nothing when it comes to sparring.

*I can take him*, he catches himself thinking, and is surprised. Is his dislike for the spy so intense that he’s willing to resort to age-old male games to settle the score? Or is this from some macho sense of duty to O’Connor? Defending the little lady?

He suddenly feels more than a little like a schoolyard bully.

But before he can gracefully back out, Flynn says, “Very well, Captain. I’m sure sparring with you will be good exercise.”

*Well*, Kirk thinks, *nothing for it now but to try not to get my butt whipped*.

“Full contact?”

“No, I don’t think that would be a good idea, Captain.”

That really nettles him, especially the way Flynn looked embarrassed by the suggestion. *Afraid of hurting the old man, no doubt.*

Kirk adds another reason not to like the spy to the pile he’s been storing up.

He knows he is not taking aging well, but he can’t seem to do anything about it, to adjust. When you’re the youngest man ever to make starship captain, what do you have left in middle age—or beyond?

He is cursed with a good memory. He can easily recall how strong and fast he was twenty years ago. Age, with its decreasing physical abilities, is painful to the point of humiliation. And Kirk has always been a physical man. And now, to be treated with kid gloves by this spy that ten years ago would have been on the mat before he knew what hit him... Well, it's simply galling.

For his part, Flynn also finds the situation uncomfortable. It's bad enough sparring with the captain in front of a number of his crew—a number, he notices, that seems to be growing exponentially—but Kirk is so outclassed it is embarrassing.

There is no shame in being old, in the body's aging. One of Flynn's few real friends, his mentor at Starfleet, is so old that even modern medicine can't free him from a wheelchair, and Flynn has more respect for him than for anyone he has ever known. But Kirk is so stuffy, so vain and pompous. Compensating for growing older, no doubt. But more than that, a stiffening of the mind, that's what he sees when he looks at Kirk.

That's also what he fears seeing in himself, if he wants to be honest with himself—fears at a level approaching dread more and more as the years pile up, threatening to bury him in the weight of his own memories.

Long gone is the suppleness of a youthful mind. It has gone so far that he has to sometimes consciously make himself move his body like a thirty-year old. A spy can't afford to stand out. People say you can read something of wisdom, pain, experience in the eyes; that's hogwash, he knows. His eyes remain the eyes of a young man. But still, with every passing year, he feels more and more that the person staring back at him from the mirror each day is a stranger.

The two fighters bow and begin circling, looking for an opening. Flynn has the irrational but almost overpowering feeling that Kirk is the straitjacket of an aging mind personified, that the hated hardening of the mental arteries can somehow be staved off just by beating him.

Kirk circles while Flynn pivots, moving hardly at all, just enough to keep the other in view. Neither's face reveals any plan of attack, but where Kirk seems tense, Flynn is relaxed, more at ease. Kirk feints a backfist to Flynn's head. Flynn ducks and easily blocks the follow-up sidekick, but he doesn't attack.

The pattern, now established, continues for a while. Circling. Kirk attacks. Flynn blocks.

To Flynn, it is as if he is rotating vertiginously like a planet, the gathered crew are stars glaring hatred at him as he turns, the captain a hostile moon. He spares a little attention to study their faces. What he sees there would frighten him, had not fear been more or less washed out of him long ago. There is a hunger in them, a palpable desire for Kirk not only to defeat him in a sparring match, but to destroy him.

Apparently Jean's story, the gist if not the details, has raced throughout the ship more quickly than he had realized.

"Why don't you *fight*?" Kirk asks, obviously frustrated. "Or are you waiting to surprise me, spy?" he adds under his breath, only loud enough for Flynn to hear.

*Well, Flynn thinks, if its a reaction you want...*

He explodes into action, sidekick to the midriff, punch to the face, both blocked, but just barely.

“You obviously have a problem with spies, Captain, but are you sure you aren’t just projecting? You’ve been on missions where you’ve had to be a spy. We’re not that different, maybe, and you don’t like that.”

Kirk scowls. “Oh, we’re different all right.”

He spins, lashes out with a kick, spins, punches again to the stomach. The punch if not the kick gets through, threatening to take Flynn’s breath away.

*So much for light contact,* Flynn thinks.

“If the need arises,” Kirk says, “I’ll admit I’ll use sneaking around as a last resort. But it’s not the way I choose to live my life. If I have a quarrel with someone, I’d rather fight face to face than slip a knife between their ribs from behind.”

Flynn starts to say something in his own defense. It causes him to hesitate, not much, but enough. Kirk feints low, and Flynn makes the mistake of lowering his guard just a little. The roundhouse kick connects with the side of his face, leaving a red mark and staggering him slightly. The crowd cheers.

“Nice shot,” he says, unsure himself if he means the kick or the verbal slap. The side of his face stings. If repairs aren’t made, there will be nasty bruise there tomorrow.

But then, repairs are always made.

Kirk launches into another attack, but hits nothing. Flynn finally attacks in earnest, blocking, spinning, then lashing out savagely with a backfist that stops as soon as it touches Kirk’s skin. Kirk has become overconfident. Flynn follows with a kick, stopping as it touches Kirk’s stomach, then the same foot delivers a wheel kick to the side of his head, pulled exquisitely close. Kirk is still trying to block the first one when the last one is thrown. Finally, Flynn not so much kicks as shoves Kirk with a front kick. The captain trips over his own feet and falls, embarrassed. The crowd boos and hisses.

Flynn offers Kirk his hand.

“You don’t have to pull your punches and kicks,” Kirk grumbles, getting to his feet and ignoring Flynn’s hand. “I can take it. I’m not some old codger that you have to coddle, you know. I’m probably younger than you by a long shot!”

Flynn looks at him quizzically. *Now how does he know that?*

They bow and continue circling, Kirk more warily than before.

Flynn wonders where this is heading. He can see no graceful, face-saving stopping point for either of them. He can’t really fight, not for real; he doesn’t want to hurt the captain or, worse, embarrass him further in front of the crew. He also cannot chance taking a dive; Kirk is an experienced fighter and would undoubtedly realize what had happened—that would permanently alienate him. And under no circumstances can he afford to take enough punishment to trigger, and that’s a real possibility—Kirk is surprisingly good. Aside from secrecy’s sake, he has too much emotional investment in this “sparring match” to risk it. He would likely not be able to keep from killing Kirk.

Their reflexes are about the same, now that Kirk is thoroughly on guard. In fact, Flynn is gratified to realize that, with him untriggered, their basic level of skill is about the same. But Flynn has, effectively, a younger body and his reflexes have been honed for scores of years.

He fends off most of the captain's attacks. With each counter, though, he sees frustration edging Kirk closer to real anger.

"Captain," he says, still circling, "Why don't we call it a draw and stop? I don't want to hurt you, and I would just as soon you not hurt me."

"What's the matter, *spy*?" Kirk hisses, spitting the word out as if it tastes vile. Flynn realizes that he has misinterpreted the offer to quit as condescension. Kirk slips a sidekick through his guard and into his stomach. "Can't take a fair fight? Need to sneak up on me instead?"

*I've got to stop this now*, thinks Flynn as he feels hormones begin to trickle icy-hot into his bloodstream in response to both the physical and mental injuries he has sustained. With real alarm, he feels the old bloodlust rising within him, a kind of glee at the prospect of breaking Kirk's bones. He feels an echo of dangerous, reckless, familiar exhilaration. If he triggers now, Kirk will likely be dead in seconds.

With an effort of will, he drops his guard completely and stands defenseless.

Unfortunately, Kirk was in the middle of an attack. Before the captain realizes what is happening, his powerful sidekick connects with Flynn's mouth. Flynn spins around, pain exploding in his jaw as consciousness slips away like a cloud he can't quite hold onto. He falls in a heap on the mat, blood streaming from broken lips. With his last bit of conscious volition, he desperately holds the triggering at bay.

"Nice work, Jim," someone says sarcastically from behind Kirk. McCoy. He had been passing by the shuttle bay, saw the crowd, came in to watch. "Let's hope you haven't killed him."

"Bones," Kirk says, a pleading note in his voice. "He just dropped his guard—I didn't mean to hurt him!"

"Didn't look that way from where I was standing," McCoy says, though not unkindly, and pushes him gently aside to kneel by Flynn. He runs a medical scanner over his body and face, but before he has a chance to do more, the patient opens his eyes and sits up.

"Another nice shot, Captain," Flynn says mildly, putting a hand to his wounded face. "And I'm sure I've done plenty in the past to deserve that. But, please, *now* may we quit?"

To McCoy's surprise, the bleeding has already stopped. Cuts that looked terrible a minute ago now seem minor.

*Getting old, I guess*, he thinks, shaking his head.

Kirk is more relieved than he would like to admit. It's not just that he might have disabled an operative in charge of a sensitive mission. It's his own motivation in starting the fight (and that's really what it was, he knows, not a sparring match) that worries him. He was trying to *hurt* Flynn, and finally succeeded.

It was not very satisfying.

He offers a hand to Flynn.

“Sorry,” he says sheepishly.

“No real harm done, Captain.” He takes Kirk’s hand and lets himself be helped up. “I’ve underestimated you. You’re good. Thanks for the match.”

He brushes away McCoy’s suggestion that he go to sickbay for observation. “I’m fine, doctor, really,” he says. “Just a split lip. I’ve had worse. Captain, shall we meet this evening to discuss our strategy for the mission again?”

Kirk nods agreement.

Flynn throws his towel across his shoulders and pushes through the gathered crew toward the showers, ignoring their stares and the half-heard remarks, pretending they don’t exist.

He won’t give them the satisfaction of rubbing his jaw where the kick connected, though it hurts like hell. And it itches maddeningly, now that the repairs have begun.

# Chapter Five

“You wanted to see me, Bones?” Kirk asks as he and Spock enter sickbay.

“Yeah, I did,” McCoy drawls, waving them over to where he stands beside a lab computer’s screen. “I just analyzed the data I took from our friend after your ‘match.’ ”

Kirk flushes, but says nothing.

“Jim, the man’s not normal.”

“Oh?”

“Take a look for yourself,” he says, waving a hand at the screen. Spock moves to take a closer look. “Most of his biochemistry is just enough out of whack to give my equipment headaches. There were also traces of very strong neurotransmitters and hormones in his system.”

“Drugs?”

“Don’t know. At least, not like any I’ve seen before. They look almost natural, but not quite. But then, most good designer drugs do. You make anything of it, Spock?”

“Interesting,” he says, still peering into the screen. He touches the pad briefly and symbols fly over the screen.

He straightens. “But no, Doctor, I cannot, though I concur with your analysis. There may be a pattern to all the variations from normal, but it will require more study to discern; and I doubt Commodore Flynn will be willing to submit to tests. The chemicals could be drugs, or they could simply be an indication of an aberrant biochemistry.”

“Bones, Spock,” says Kirk, “see if you can dig up any other information about similar abnormalities from the computer’s knowledge base. Keep at it; even mouse around over the subspace net if you have to, but quietly, and before we get to close to Athena. I’d like to know what we’re dealing with.”

He thinks of O’Connor.

“Man or monster.”



Flynn walks along deserted corridors toward his rendezvous with Kirk. Mealtime; everything is quiet. He is brooding about the incident in the gym, still pondering what it means and what it portends for the mission. He can’t figure out how it got so far out of hand. How he let it get so far out of hand. He was as much to blame as Kirk.

Well, almost.

His face has almost completely healed, though one tooth, while no longer loose, still hurts. Soon, there will be no physical trace of what happened. But the crew all knows by now how the captain decked a man in better shape and apparently half his age.

*Maybe it’s for the best after all*, he thinks.

Now, instead of hatred, perhaps he’ll be seen as a buffoon, an ineffectual joke, not some monstrous murderer. He would rather have anonymity, but being a laughingstock is almost as good. For a spy.

It's been many long years he's been with the Federation, many years since he's had to watch his back all the time. He feels safe on the *Enterprise*, even knowing it could harbor his counterparts from Ocht's apparatus.

It is this feeling of security that betrays him.

He heard them, but paid no attention. Two burly men stepped from a side corridor and now are following him at a little distance. At some level, perhaps, he is aware that they are getting closer, but still... The carefully-modulated environment, the nondescript corridors and compartments, designed to be reassuring, almost friendly. No one would try for him *here*. There is no *real* evidence that any of Ocht's spies are aboard. After all, Ocht would have no way of knowing that *Enterprise* would become involved.

"Hey, *spy*," the larger of the two calls, his sneer as apparent as if Flynn could see it.

He is jolted from his thoughts, but continues walking, trying to ignore them. *They aren't Ocht's spies*, he reminds himself. If they were, he would already be dead.

It is more than a little troubling how rapidly his vocation has become widely known. These, though, are most likely just troublemakers, emboldened by his defeat this afternoon. Maybe an officer will come by. Maybe there'll be a turbolift around the corner.

But the two antagonists know the ship well and have carefully planned their ambush. The corridor is completely empty except for them, and turning the corner produces neither an officer nor a lift.

"I'm talking to you, big man," the same one says. "I hear you're the type that likes to kill little girls' fathers."

With a feeling of resignation, he turns and faces them. They are every bit as huge as their footfalls predicted. Their uniforms are red: security. Well-trained. He sighs. This does not look good.

"I don't want any trouble, gentlemen. I'm on my way to see Captain Kirk. I don't want to be late."

"I don't want, I don't want," the other man mocks. "What about what Jean O'Connor wanted, like a normal childhood and a father. Maybe we'll just finish what the captain started this morning; teach you a little lesson you won't forget anytime soon. If ever."

They have been working themselves into quite a state, that's apparent. It is very rare that bullies make it through Starfleet security training. These two are really after blood, not just to scare him. They are probably prepared to give him a good beating, at the very least. He considers if it is worth getting beat up to avoid real trouble, to maintain secrecy, but when he hears two others creeping up behind him, his decision is made.

A dead spy is no good to anyone.

Other hormones have been trickling into his blood along with the adrenaline, but this time he doesn't fight them.

He triggers.

*I just hope I can keep from killing them*, is his last completely rational thought.

Neurotransmitters flood from his pituitary, a torrent pouring into his bloodstream. In moments, they are throughout his body, lovingly caressing every cell. Where they touch, changes rapidly take place. Peripheral blood vessels constrict, shepherding blood to his muscles and away from potential sites of cuts. Enzymatic changes take place in his bones, making them stronger, more elastic and less brittle. Immune system cellular and antibody defenses crank up, readying for possible biological insult. Liver function steps up dramatically, enzymes for several obscure pathways becoming active, making him almost unpoisonable. Skin changes occur, readying for possible burns and chemical injury: permeability decreases to a range of substances, temperature conductivity increases to spread heat. Biochemical pathways in his brain and muscles are activated to facilitate anaerobic metabolism. Simultaneously, myoglobin in muscles and an analogous, though unusual, protein in his brain change their conformation slightly to store much more oxygen; his heart can stop now for many minutes before serious injury occurs. Actin and myosin molecules also change conformation, their interactions becoming quicker, more efficient, stronger. Sight, hearing, other senses become more acute. Proteinaceous compounds secreted by gland cells in his lungs coat the alveoli, making his lungs self-sealing. His heart slows, but beats with more power. Neurons increase their processing rate, axons increase transmission speed, synapses become faster.

The changes occur in the span of a second or two. They are largely complete before the largest of the men lunges for him. With inhuman speed, Flynn dodges, delivers an elbow strike to the man's kidney as he goes past, pulling it enough to keep it from being lethal. A second man reaches for a phaser at his belt, but never gets to complete the motion. Flynn grabs hand and phaser, rips the weapon from his grasp, slams it into the man's jaw. He tosses the phaser down the corridor to rattle against the far end.

Meanwhile, a third man, short but broad, has jumped on his back and is now trying to strangle him. He outweighs Flynn by a good twenty kilos, all of it muscle. Flynn grabs the man's hands and detaches him as easily as an adult would detach a child from a jungle gym. Without visible strain, he tosses the man halfway down the corridor away from the phaser.

The fourth man is the runt of the attackers, shorter than Flynn, though a little bulkier. Instead of rushing to attack, he has kept his head. Now, he crouches in a karate stance, a faint smile playing about his lips. His features are Gallic, but something in the stance, his attitude, call up old memories.

*Ninja?* Flynn wonders. They are still around, he knows that; mysticism blended with superb training. A properly-trained ninja is one of the most deadly of opponents. It has been a long time since he has fought one.

In his present state, all Flynn feels is savage amusement.

*This ought to be fun, he thinks. While it lasts.*

A punch toward Flynn's head; a feint, of course, the real blow is a vicious blur of a round-house kick aimed at his side. He blocks it effortlessly, waits for the next attack. It is a flurry of assorted punches, kicks, knife-hands, all expert, all potentially fatal, all blocked. The man is *good*.

When he tries a spinning side kick, though, that's just too much. Flynn can't stand sloppiness. He doesn't even block, just moves back so fast the man has no chance to adjust or abort his kick, then steps around behind the leg and grabs it. Luckily, the man manages to lunge on his other leg well enough to get out of the way of the backfist meant for his head. Flynn's fist instead finds the bulkhead. Several dents appear in the metal where his knuckles connect. He feels pain, quickly squelched, but no broken bones.

The man tries to break free, but the fingers squeezing his calf are like metal claws. Flynn jerks him to himself, grabs the front of his uniform and lifts him off the ground with one hand. The man's attempts to kick and punch him are deftly swatted aside by his free hand, almost absently.

“So, what's the story?” Flynn's voice is calm, almost as unnerving as his speed and strength. He is not in the least winded. “Who sent you?”

The guard tries to punch him by way of answer; his hand is effortlessly brushed away. He tries to kick Flynn in the groin; blocked with a leg. Flynn slaps him, hard.

“I'll ask you just one more time,” Flynn says, his voice still calm, matter-of-fact. “If you don't answer, I'll snap your neck and wake one of the others. No skin off my nose. Who sent you? Lie to me, you die. And I'll know if you're lying.”

Staring at Flynn's hard eyes, the man believes him. All the fight flows out of him like a physical thing, and he becomes a rag doll in Flynn's grasp.

*Some ninja*, Flynn thinks contemptuously.

A flashback, one of the occasional side-effects of triggering. A memory blossoms full-blown in his mind and quickly evaporates. He remembers a *real* ninja he fought many, many years ago, back soon after his training was over. *That* was a worthy opponent, the best unaugmented fighter he's ever faced. He still remembers her surreally beautiful, serene face, up-slanted almond eyes framed by coarse, short, ebony hair. She took an incredible amount of punishment and still wouldn't stop fighting. She even wounded him, a couple of broken ribs. He finally had to kill her, which he regretted even in his triggered state.

*This “ninja” might have had some training, might even fancy himself the real thing, but he sure doesn't have the stomach for it.*

“No one sent us,” the man says miserably, after trying three times to summon words. “Johi, the big guy that jumped you first, he's Jean's boyfriend, sort of, or was. We're friends of his.”

The words seem to push themselves aside to get out of his mouth now.

“There's been talk about you, we've all heard Jean's story about her father. Jean didn't tell us anything, but after she fainted and spent some time in sickbay, Johi figured out from other scuttlebutt that you're the same guy. We decided to teach you a lesson.”

“I see.” Flynn glares at him, trying to be stern, but his amusement shows through. It doesn't matter. The obvious contempt with which he views their pathetic attempt to ambush him only frightens the man more.

“Thanks to you, I *did* learn a lesson. I learned that I have to watch my back. Thank you very much, I’ll be doing that from now on. Now what shall I do about you four? Kill you as an example, so others won’t be tempted to pull the tiger’s tail, hmm?”

“No, mister, don’t do it,” the other man says, his eyes huge. Something about Flynn is eerie, cold-blooded, like a human snake. A killer; a casual killer. “Don’t kill me, please!”

Flynn gazes at him for a moment longer.

“Okay, you caught me in a kind mood. I’ll let you go. But here’s something I want you and your buddies to think about when they wake up. I’m sure you’re all good at your jobs. So am I; very, very good. But remember this: my job involves killing, with no remorse, no hesitation, no regrets. As you will find out if you every try anything this stupid again. Understood?”

As a final gesture of contempt, he throws the man against the bulkhead and walks off, not even deigning to look back.

In the turbolift, when the door has closed, blocking him from their view, he lets the changes subside and presses his head against the cool wall. The after-effects start immediately, predictably.

*At least this was only for a few minutes.*

The rebound will only be painful, not agonizing.

On cue, his head begins pounding.



On the bridge, Kirk is just leaving to meet Flynn when Spock calls him over to the library computer station.

“Yes, Spock, what is it?”

“Captain, the computer has just reported an incident on D deck involving Commodore Flynn.”

“‘Incident,’ Spock?” Kirk can see that Spock is very surprised by something. Never a good sign.

Once, while the two of them were hiking in the desert on Earth, Spock almost stepped on a sidewinder. With superhuman speed, he plucked the snake from the ground by the nape of its neck and tossed it gently away from the path, all without any change of expression.

“What sort of incident?”

“Four crewmen ambushed Flynn in a deserted corridor. Three of them are security guards, including Jacques LaRue.

“Damn.”

As little as he likes Flynn, he is nonetheless worried for the spy’s safety. LaRue is well-trained, the best fighter on the ship. He was a Marine until just a few months ago when he transferred to *Enterprise*. He has won several martial arts tournaments, two at the planet-wide level.

*If I can injure Flynn, what can LaRue do to him?*

“How badly is Flynn hurt?”

Spock raises both eyebrows and starts to say something, then stops.

“I think,” he says instead, “that you should see this.”

He replays the fight for Kirk from the computer’s records. Security incidents are recorded as a matter of course, when the computer detects them. Perhaps the four attackers had counted on the ambush being successful enough that there would be little noise, little to lead the computer to take an interest.

Kirk sees them corner the spy, watches Flynn trying to talk his way out of it. Then, something odd—Flynn is no longer moving at a normal speed. It is like a recording played at fast forward, except that the other men are all moving normally. Flynn is like a cat on speed, his movements fluid and faster than Kirk has ever seen anyone move before.

“My God,” Kirk breathes when he sees Flynn dent the wall. They watch him easily take LaRue, hear his confession.

“Have a security detail round up those four and put them in the brig,” Kirk says.

But he is thinking: *I was fighting that man this morning?*

A chill runs down his back. He can suddenly see why a child might think of Flynn as a monster, a demon.

*And that’s a good question. Is he human?*

# Chapter Six

Later, in his cabin, Flynn leans back in a chair and thinks about the plans he and Kirk have made.

Kirk knew about the fight, but how much he knows (or guesses) beyond that about Flynn himself, he doesn't know. He just said to Flynn that the men involved had been put in the brig. Then he apologized, albeit stiffly, for his crewmen. Flynn waved it off, hoping Kirk wouldn't want to discuss it further. Thankfully, he hadn't, though he regarded Flynn curiously, as if trying to see beyond his careful façade to the man beneath.

Flynn wasn't about to let that happen.

Flynn's old plan, developed with a few other senior operatives one foggy, chilly San Francisco morning, called for a direct trip to Athena. Deploying his cloaked ship from *Enterprise* would be risky, but there didn't seem to be a better way to get to the surface. Athenian defenses would undoubtedly detect and automatically scramble a transporter beam. It was unanimous that he should try the direct, though invisible, approach.

But then, the others weren't going, and they didn't much like him, either.

By rights, *he* should have been the one that resented *them*. They were much younger than he, after all, and yet outranked him. Where they had progressed in their careers to the level of desk jockeys, obtaining and holding their posts as much by political acumen as skill at their jobs, he was still a field operative.

But to be fair, he was a field operative as much by choice as by fiat. Besides, there was no way that Starfleet, once obtaining an augmented operative, was going to let him waste his unique talents. So he was very well paid and, despite the vagaries of rank that required field officers to be inferior to case officers at headquarters, he in essence was autonomous and answerable to no one save the very highest levels of Starfleet.

When told the plan, Kirk surprised him by immediately offering a better one, one that that had not even been considered Earthside. Kirk was obviously not fond of the plan's specifics, but, to his credit, it did not keep him from proposing it. Kirk's resourcefulness was gratifying. It was more what he expected from the hero he had envisioned. Perhaps he should not too quickly dismiss him as a valuable resource.

Bach's *Toccata and Fugue* fills the cabin, called up after the meeting from the bowels of the ship's computer to help him think. It has turned the austerity of the small room into a virtue, imbuing it with a cathedral's palpable, charged atmosphere. The organ's majestic voice, the sheer inevitability of Bach's music, suggests purpose, unstoppable impetus, as if the listener's actions are sanctioned by God Himself.

Flynn, alone, where he can drop all pretense of bravura, finds it soothing, reassuring. He is both worried and saddened. The task set him is a daunting one, as are all that Starfleet deems worth risking their augment on. Ocht is, from the information Flynn has seen so far, in the process of efficiently dismantling a large, planet-wide network of spies. Granted, most of them

were Athenians, some quite high in Ocht's government, who were surreptitiously on Starfleet's payroll. But there were also some field operatives.

Reluctantly, he turns his attention to the new reports from Athena now displayed on the small notebook in his lap. The reports, passed via Starfleet from what is left of the spy network on the planet, are not encouraging. Ocht, as expected, is being most efficient. Flynn doubts there will be many operatives—if any—left when he arrives. Any that are left will undoubtedly be so far undercover that he will have a chore finding them and convincing them to trust him.

The current screen on his data pad tells of a friend's death, most probably under torture, after her cover was blown. The previous screens told similar stories, and there are more to go.

He thinks back to the last time he saw Sherry, when she was home and he was putting in a stint at headquarters doing desk work while recuperating from wounds even his augmented body could not heal quickly. She is...was...a sweet woman of about thirty years, very competent for all that she most decidedly did not look like a spy. But that was one thing that made her so effective. She was smallish, maybe one and two thirds meters tall and slight of build, almost waifish: small breasts, negligible hips. A very pretty face; he remembers her sensuous lips, her deep brown eyes, her straw-blonde hair, her freckles.

They took a liking to one another almost immediately when they first met. She had high enough clearance to know what he was, but she didn't care. To her, he was just himself, Flynn, and not an operative, a case officer, or "the augment." He found himself attracted mentally first, especially to acceptance of him and her humor, and only later physically. But when they did connect physically, it was very, very good.

The first time was after they had been sparring. It was a fairly even match, provided he didn't trigger. She was a good fighter, belying her appearance. Sneaky.

She had just delivered a particularly vicious kick to his stomach that he blocked only by grabbing her leg. She retaliated by grabbing him, intending to use a judo throw to release herself. In the end, they ended in a tangle of arms and legs on the floor, their faces very close to one another.

For a moment, they continued to wrestle, then they locked eyes and laughed at the thought of what they must have looked like, had anyone been around to see. Then she surprised him, and possibly herself, by leaning forward and kissing him. He surprised himself by kissing her back, passionately.

They had just been lucky that it was a holiday and the building was deserted. They would have been very embarrassed had anyone walked in. For quite a while afterward, they were most definitely not sparring.

After that, they got together every time they were both on the same planet or Starbase and not on assignment. Habitually, one or the other of them would say, in a playfully suggestive tone of voice, "Wanna spar?"

And now she's dead. Gone, just like that, snuffed out in extreme pain by a madman's henchmen on a planet only important because the Federation had the bad judgment to place weapons labs there.

He wants to feel more grief than he does, more outrage, to rail against the Federation, if not the universe. He wants that so badly, if only for a few minutes: anger, maybe even tears. For Sherry. But he is old, old, and this has been going on for him from his earliest memories.

He is saddened by her death, and he will miss her dearly. It is not often that augments have close friends, or lovers that are more than sex partners. But people around him always die, sooner or later, and, quite often, people he is close to have died horribly. Over time, he has developed his own coping mechanisms, cold-hearted as they may be. Usually, he does not let himself get close to anyone. Death coming to strangers is tragic, but not debilitating. But Sherry, and all the other Sherrys in his past...

He feels the old familiar post hoc distancing begin. And he hates himself for it.

He allows himself one purely human thought before trying, successfully or not, to close out the section of his life she had shared: *You'll die for this Ocht. If I get my hands near your throat, you'll die slowly for Sherry, I swear you will.*

The Bach seems now to him to have subtly changed. It is still ponderous, unstoppable, but now it marches on without him. It is the inevitability of the universe, impersonal, uncaring, oblivious to his pain or goals, grinding him and all else to dust in its gears.



The door chimes softly. Gratefully, he puts the pad down on the desk in front of him.

“Reduce volume, fifty percent” he says to the room. Then, louder: “Come in.”

The door opens with a quiet hiss. Jean O’Connor stands there, frightened and pale.

He stands, flustered. He was not expecting this.

“Lt. O’Connor,” he says, then stops. What can he say now, he wonders? How do you handle a little tête-a-tête with the child of someone you murdered? “Won’t you...uh, won’t you come in?”

She makes no move. For a moment, he is afraid she will bolt and run. Visibly summoning courage, she steps tentatively into the cabin, only the tiniest step. The door swishes shut behind her, making her start violently. She blushes. But her wide-eyed stare never leaves his face.

With his professional’s eye, he looks her over. A tall, slender young woman. Shoulder-length black hair, so curly it is almost in ringlets, deep green eyes. Very pretty in that porcelain-fragile way some women of Irish ancestry have. But perhaps that is not quite accurate. Unworldly. Quite worldly figure, though, he thinks, at least as far as the ugly red and black uniform reveals.

No obvious unnatural bulges, but still he wonders: *Is she armed?*

He briefly considers triggering, but a rising tide of self-disgust sweeps his professional paranoia away. If she wants to kill him, she has every right, and he has very little right to stop her. Only duty and long habit keep him at all wary.

“To what do I owe...” he begins stiffly, then feels stupid and clumsy. “What can I do for you?”

She swallows, looking at him like a bird might look at a snake, afraid, but also unable to look away.

“I came,” she says, almost a squeak, then clears her throat. “I came to explain about Johi.”

It is the first time he has ever heard her voice when she's not been hysterical. A very nice voice. Rather deep, saved from sultriness by a slight lilt, a hint of naïvete. He had often tried to imagine what her voice would be like, but her files contained no recordings after childhood.

"He had no right to attack you for me," she continues. "I want you to know I had nothing to do with it."

"I didn't suppose you had," he says. "In any case, I wasn't hurt, and I don't think I permanently injured any of them." He perches on the edge of the desk, trying to act casual, but instead feeling old and stiff. "I don't blame them either, really. They were, in their way, trying to avenge you."

"You misunderstand," she says, an edge in her voice over the fear. "I wouldn't care if they had killed you. I wish they had. I hate you for what you did to my father. But I don't want others fighting my fights for me."

He looks at her for a moment, assessing.

"So," he says finally. "Did you come here for revenge, then? To fight your own fight now?" He shakes his head sadly. "Not that I would blame you for it. But I have to warn you that I can't let you kill me, not until after this mission is over."

She stares at him for a moment in astonishment.

"You're a strange sort of spy," she finally says. "After the mission, you're fair game—that it?"

"I guess so," he says. "Look, I'm sorry for what happened to your father. Sorrier than for almost any of the other miserable things I've done in my life. I deserve anything you feel like doing to me, and you deserve a chance at revenge, if that's what you really want. And I'm increasingly too weary of the whole thing to worry about it. But later. The interests of the Federation come first, always."

"Sorry," she mocks. "'Sorry' is a pretty poor word to expunge a murder."

"Yeah, it is." He sighs. "But it's the only word I have. And it wasn't really murder, at least not from the standpoint of the government, though you—and I—may think differently. But nothing I can say or do will undo what's been done to you. I can't un-kill your father. I can't go back in time and move you out of the room."

"Look, I don't ask forgiveness. That would be pointless and self-indulgent. But I would like you to know that I deeply regret the necessity that led to your father's death by my hand."

She moves slightly away from the door, though still keeping an eye on him. Still, maybe a hopeful sign. He wants her to understand him, to see past her memories of a monstrous killer to...

*To what?* he wonders. What else is there, really? How many Sherrys has he killed in his time, how many of their lovers has he left broken-hearted? How many Jeans has he left fatherless?

After all these years, thinking of the ways he might meet her, hoping that he would get a chance to know her as a person instead of as a victim, now to have that chance but feel a palpable, impenetrable gulf yawning between them, a chasm caused by the blood on his hands... It was terribly frustrating.

“You’re wondering if I’m carrying a phaser, aren’t you?”

She walks a little way around the cabin, keeping her arms free. He follows her with his eyes, automatically assessing angles, timing. She is highly trained and proficient with many weapons; that he knows from her dossier. If she has a phaser tucked in the back of her pants, under her tunic, he will have a second or more while she draws and aims. Plenty of time, triggered; close if not. But triggered, he might kill her. Untriggered, she might kill him.

“It would be easy enough, you know, for a security guard to spoof the lock on the weapons locker. One of the people who attacked you did just that. I could have come by the locker, grabbed a phaser, then come here to kill you. Like you did my father.”

“You play a dangerous game,” he warns. “If I’m the monster you think I am, what makes you think I won’t kill you first, without provocation?”

“You don’t seem to be *quite* the monster I imagined,” she admits, reluctantly, as if musing aloud. “Almost human. It doesn’t make me hate you any less, but I realize now that the damned Federation is ultimately responsible for what happened. You were just a foot soldier. You wouldn’t kill me unless you had to, I’m guessing. If nothing else, it would complicate your mission.”

“No, you can relax. I came here for information, not revenge.”

He doesn’t relax, of course, though he would like nothing better. He is in a maudlin mood after learning of Sherry’s death; he would like a drink or six with a potential friend rather than a standoff with an enemy. But if he has learned anything in his long life, it is that you can’t always have the things you most want.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to judge the Federation,” he says gently. “I’ve seen other empires and federations in my line of work. Ours isn’t so bad.”

“But what information do you want? I’ll answer anything I can.”

Unspoken, and unnecessary to say, was that he would not be able to answer many things.

“Two things, really. First, how did you recognize me? It has been years, and I was just a child then. I saw the recognition in your face.”

He sighs.

“When... Well, after I saw you standing there, a small child, I knew I had to do something with you, get you to relatives or a social worker, something. I tried to calm you, but you screamed and ran.”

“Small wonder.”

“No kidding. You disappeared into some kind of trapdoor in the wall.”

“An old cleaning hatch!” she says. “It opened into the cleaning robots’ tunnels. I used to play in them. I had forgotten about that.”

“They were too small for me, of course, so I followed the sounds, finally figuring out that you were heading down. I went into the cellar and found a larger door. It was an eerie place, tunnels connecting with some sort of old catacombs under the town, with motion-sensing lights, about half of them working. The whole place had an evil red glow.”

He surprises both of them by visibly shivering. He sees her in his mind's eye, a small child, helpless, frightened, cornered.

"I finally caught up with you. You screamed over and over that I was a monster, then fainted when I touched you."

He decides she doesn't need to know what really happened, that he anesthetized her with his touch, with chemicals secreted through the skin of his palms.

"I picked you up and took you to the local social workers. They placed you with a nice family."

He looks away slightly.

"I arranged to receive regular reports from the case worker, and later, I arranged other reports. That's how I knew you."

"You spied on me," she says, her voice flat. "You spied on a little girl. I must have been quite some risk to the Federation. You must be very proud."

"No, damn it," he says, both annoyed and frustrated. "It wasn't like that at all. Look, let me explain, please. I felt...feel...responsible for you. Because, well, of what happened."

She frowns, but he hurries on.

"I kept track of you throughout your childhood, sure, but only for me, not for the Federation. It was good to know that you were doing well in school, that you were growing up strong and pretty and intelligent and seemingly happy. I offered to help in any way I could, but your foster mother refused—wisely, I realize now. I was glad when you entered Starfleet Academy. My work sometimes takes me there, and I had the opportunity to see you a couple of times, though I took care not to let you see me."

*Not that you would have recognized me,* he thinks.

He smiles ruefully.

"Unfortunately, I was away on a mission for some time and wasn't able to check up on you before coming here. I had no idea you were on *Enterprise*; if I had, I would have been much more careful."

"You watched me all those years," she says slowly, wonderingly. "I don't know whether to feel flattered or violated."

"I didn't do it out of voyeurism. I guess I can't even claim I did it out of a sense of altruism. More for me, a matter of conscience. I could look at you growing up healthy and whole and say to myself, 'See? You didn't *really* hurt her.' "

"You're a strange sort of spy," she repeats, shaking her head. "A spy with a conscience. Almost oxymoronic in a way, isn't it? Isn't it a hindrance in your line of work?"

"Lieutenant..."

"Jean," she corrects sardonically, "please." For the first time, her face betrays a ghost of a smile. Ironic, yes, but still a smile. "After all, you've known me since I was a kid."

A brief, brittle laugh escapes her.

“You’ve haunted my dreams for years, you know that?” she asks. “Not as a man, though, but as some kind of dervish, a demon sent to torment me and my family. Now I find out that you’re just a man. Nothing special. I don’t know if I should be disappointed or thankful.”

“There was nothing I could do except what I did. I wish you hadn’t been there that day. I’d give anything... Or that I had seen you and had time to get you out of the room.”

He feels a deep need to confide in her, to ask for absolution. It is both unsettling and powerful, almost overwhelming.

“You may not believe it, but I’ve dreamed about you, too, over the years. I keep seeing you as a child, horror on your face, and I can’t take back what I’ve done.”

“You’re so young,” she says, tilting her head to regard him. “That was so many years ago.”

*Ah, here it is.* He tries to think how to dodge the implied question, one that he has heard many times before. He has never had a satisfactory answer, nor does he now.

“I was even younger then; and I look younger than I am.

“Listen,” he says, summoning courage like a schoolboy asking for his first date. “I’m starving, but I’m not exactly welcome in the mess halls. Would...would you be kind enough to join me for a late dinner while we talk?” Shyness and fear of rejection, two emotions as alien to him as anything he could have imagined before a moment ago tie his tongue, making him awkward. “I would like a chance to know you as more than just words in some second-hand report.”

She frowns, seems about to decline, possibly with less than good grace. He tries to imagine how he would feel if the positions were reversed.

*Clumsy*, he chides himself. Another thing he can’t take back.

Abruptly, she shrugs and a half-smile lights up her face, making her look absolutely lovely.

“Why not?” she says. “You’re not quite the monster I’d imagined.”

“The term ‘damned with faint praise’ springs to mind,” he says, smiling, and motions her toward the little glass table in the corner of the cabin. Three awkward-looking chairs attend it.

She takes the one nearest the cabin’s door, turning it around to face him—and, he notes, so that she can quickly stand should she have to.

*Well, a bit premature for trust, after all*, he tells himself.

But one of them has to show a modicum of trust. He deliberately turns his back to go to the synthesizer. It goes against all his instincts, all his long-ago training, all his life-long experience. The skin on his back prickles with anticipation. He expects to hear the deadly whine of a phaser, his last sensed sound, at any moment. It seems to take the food machine longer than usual to process his request, each second dragging.

Finally, the slot opens, yielding steaming boeuf bourguignon and rice, crusty French bread, red wine. Food he remembers from his stolen youth.

When he turns around with the food, she hasn’t moved. With one exception. A phaser has appeared in her hand, rock-steady and aimed at him.

Almost, he triggers. But if she means to kill him instantly, it would do him no good—he is simply too far away from her. At this distance, a hand phaser could disintegrate him and anything

he might conceivably throw at her. And if she does not mean to kill him now, then triggered, he would probably kill her at the slightest opportunity.

“What are you?” she asks, fairly calmly, given the circumstances.

“I’m a spy,” he says, pleased to note that his voice is steady. “You know that.”

“That’s right,” she says, a trace of annoyance coloring her voice. “I do know it. But *what* are you? I was young when you killed my father, not stupid. I saw the way you moved. Nothing human can move like that.”

He starts to dissemble, or at least stall, but she heads him off.

“I also talked to Johi and the others.”

The phaser has not moved.

He considers.

“Ah,” he finally says, and sighs.

“Hell. I’ll tell you, but first, are you going to shoot me with that thing, or can I go ahead and put this food on the table? Either way will keep me from burning my hands.”

She makes a little sound that could be a laugh.

“Okay. But slowly. Remember that I’m an expert shot—that was surely in the reports about me.”

*And if you only knew, he thought, carefully setting the food on the table and sitting down opposite her, that from this distance it would be a close race between your finger closing on that contact and me breaking your arm, if I were triggered.*

“You know, if you shoot me, alarms will go off all over the ship. It won’t take any great detective work to figure out it was you.”

“So? You’ve pretty successfully screwed up my life so far. What’s a little thing like prison or rehab therapy?”

As carefully as he maintains his armor, still something of his pain must have shone through; almost, he thought he saw a momentary flash of pity in her eyes.

“Okay. Now your hands aren’t burning any more. So tell.”

“Okay, but I hope I can rely on you to keep this in this room. Even Kirk doesn’t know.”

She smiles about as evilly as her pretty face allows, he thinks.

“All right, all right,” he concedes, holding up his hands in surrender. “That’s the least of my worries, you’ve got a point.”

He can’t help chuckling at the situation, but sobers quickly.

“I was under orders at one time to kill anyone who found out, though that was a long time ago. Before the Federation.”

She starts, frowns.

“Well, I said I’m older than I look, didn’t I?”

“First of all, I *am* human. At least, I started out that way—I’m not so sure anymore. A multinational company—there were still independent nations, then, and companies almost as powerful—built an elite cadre of operatives, and I was one of them.”

“When I say ‘built,’ I mean it. Children no one wanted were taken soon after birth and *changed*. This was done by both the multinationals and by governments. There was really little difference.

“We were exposed to special viruses, vectors carrying carefully-tailored snippets of DNA, clever little things that would insinuate themselves into our genomes. Most of us didn’t make it. Odd interactions with the native genome or mitochondrial DNA, or sometimes the virus itself would attack the kid’s already over-stressed immune system. Even when it worked, it was... Painful.”

Even across all the years, the memory makes him shudder. He remembers the torture that was routinely, antiseptically administered by the faceless doctors and technicians. He remembers waking up each morning, checking to see who had survived the night. He remembers the fear, the horror, the revulsion at the effect the viruses were having on his body and mind. He remembers coming more and more to envy those still, unbreathing corpses on other beds.

Those who survived were not quite human anymore. Better, in many ways. Faster, stronger, able to do things with their cellular and genomic machinery that were amazing. But in other ways, deficient. All of them were psychopaths, pure and simple, when triggered. Many of them were even when not triggered. It took him decades to even begin to control the bloodlust.

In between the viral “treatments,” they trained the children, and later, the adolescents, in firearms, martial arts, knife fighting, how to break into buildings and computer networks, how to pilot, drive, or fly almost any kind of conveyance.

He tells her all this in a rush, almost unmindful of the phaser’s unblinking eye on him. When he pauses, he notices that she has lowered it a little. Enough that if he were to trigger, he could have the phaser without trouble.

But then he would never have her trust.

“I can’t believe any human government—or organization—would do that to children!” she exclaims. “It’s obscene.”

“Yes, it was. But things like that still happen in human space, sad to say. Oh, maybe not in the Federation, we’re beyond all that...I hope. But planetary governments, some of them might be tempted to play God. The technology is still around, after all. Athena, for example. Who knows? If you don’t shoot me, I may be meeting fellow monsters soon. If so, I just hope they don’t make ‘em like they used to.”

The thought of more like him made her eyes go slightly wider.

“What happened after they changed you and trained you? What did they use you for?”

“After ‘graduation,’ we were given our first mission. It didn’t matter at all. It was just a bleeding exercise, a rite of passage. Each of us had to kill someone picked at random, for no reason other than we were told to. Those who didn’t have the stomach for it never came back. They were quietly disposed of by more experienced augments who were watching them. The rest of us were ready for use.”

She stares at him, openly appalled. The phaser has swung back up to lock onto him. “You killed someone in cold blood, for no reason? Just because someone told you?”

“Yeah.” He meets her eyes. “Yeah I did. Lots of people. I’m not proud of it. I don’t do it any more. But it’s something I’ve learned to live with.

“You’ve got to understand, that was along time ago. But I can’t expect you to understand, not really. The Federation you’ve grown up in is so civilized, so urbane. But people haven’t changed, not really. People are capable of a great deal of barbarism when properly brainwashed, and my ‘makers’ were very good at it.

“It wasn’t just the brainwashing, either. Right now, I’m just an normal sort of guy. But then, right now, all the changes, all the things that make me an augment, are inactive. When they’re active, when I trigger, my inhibitions against killing just melt away.”

She draws a sharp breath. “Johi and the others...!”

“Are lucky they aren’t dead,” he finishes for her. “Yeah. It was a real struggle not to kill them. But over the years, I’m getting better at controlling the bloodlust.”

“Are you...triggered...now?” Her knuckles are white from gripping the phaser.

“No,” he sighs. “I couldn’t risk it. Rational thought is not a strong point for an augment when triggered. If I were triggered and you let that phaser waver the least bit, I’d probably seize the opportunity to disarm you. At the very least. And I won’t risk hurting you.”

He doesn’t add *again*, but it hangs in the air between them.

“Quite a gamble,” she says, gazing at him searchingly. Abruptly, she flicks off the phaser and tucks it into her tunic in one swift, practiced motion. She pulls the plate over to her, as if nothing had happened, and begins to eat.

“For you, too,” he says, hardly daring to believe it is over.

She shrugs. “Seems only fair. You trusted me not to kill you. Maybe I should trust you, too. We’re both Starfleet officers, after all. That should count for something, I guess.”

“Thank you,” he says, raising his wine glass to her, then taking a much-needed drink.

She toys with the food for a bit, then says: “So what happened? You just keep killing for them?”

“Yeah. For a while that’s just what I did. I didn’t know any better, I guess. Or care. Stealing company or government secrets, kidnapping rivals’ scientists, sabotage, bodyguard duty, assassinations. The money and off-duty lifestyle were good. I didn’t think too much about the killing for a long time. It was just part of the job. But the older I got, the more it began to seem wrong, that killing wasn’t the best way to make a living.”

He told her about his last assignment, the one that pushed him over the edge, made him realize he had to get out. Some genius at another company’s lab, turned out electronic warfare programs you wouldn’t believe. Couldn’t be bought, wouldn’t defect, probably wouldn’t cooperate even if he were kidnapped. So Flynn was sent to kill him. He was just a name and address, like others before him, a time when he was guaranteed to be in. Flynn broke in, took out the guards. The mark reached for a gun, he shot him in the head, close range, projectile weapon. Only then did Flynn see that his target, the computer genius, was a child, maybe twelve years old, and the gun was a toy. The kid was so young he probably thought Flynn was playing a game.

“The bloodlust got me through it, got me away. But when I came down, I lost my lunch, then... Well, then, I realized I just couldn’t do it anymore.”

“You can’t just quit a job like that,” Jean says.

“No, of course not. By that time, my company was watching me closely. I knew that the minute they concluded I was thinking about escape, they would kill me. I had to be very careful. The assassins would be augments, too.”

He went underground. Worked off and on freelance for a while, always keeping a low profile. Teamed up with a non-augment for a while, until she got tired of him taking too many risks to try to track down and kill other augments.

Finally, he hooked up with another augment, one whom he had known as long as he could remember, who was also on the skids. They were as close to being friends as augments got. They decided to stow away on a colony ship and leave Earth completely.

They almost made it. The assassin team caught them at the spaceport and decided to have a little fun. The Company had discovered, and told the team, that he and Maria had become lovers. The assassins thought it would be fun to kill her while Flynn watched. He can still remember her screams as they slowly tortured her. And it takes a lot to make an augment feel pain.

Something happened then, something that he has not been able to piece together since. He was a little crazy by then himself, and triggered as well. But something happened; maybe an explosion of some sort, maybe something that one of the assassins had been carrying. One minute, Flynn was trying to break the grip of the three augments holding him to help Maria, and the next he was standing, injured but free, with dead augments all around. Maria was still alive, but just barely. She died in his arms.

“I buried her the best I could, then snuck aboard the ship.”

He takes a sip of burgundy. Jean is gazing at him with a look of...well, he’s not sure what. Not pity exactly; maybe sympathy, maybe more.

*Or maybe she’s just feeling vindicated that I’ve lost someone I loved, too.*

He tells her of the journey off Earth on the ship, one of the first bound for the interstellar colonies, pre-warp. He was discovered a week into the trip, but they had no record of him being a criminal and they weren’t about to turn around. Being more pragmatic than they were cold-hearted, they tossed him in to a sleptank and woke him up at New Haven. They would need every able body they could get. It was a hard life on the early colony worlds.

He clears the dishes as he talks. He motions her to a seat on the couch. He sits at the one end. She is almost, but not quite, hugging the opposite arm. But at least she is keeping her hand away from her phaser.

“I became a peaceful farmer. I couldn’t afford to get angry, after all—I’d kill someone. I got married, looked forward to growing old there with her. It was idyllic.”

He smiles ruefully and shakes his head.

It was idyllic, at least until it became apparent that he was not growing any older. It surprised him as much as it did his neighbors. At first, they said he must come from good stock. Then they became jealous, began to resent him, then finally, to fear and hate him.

He watched his wife grow old before her time from the hard life. He was helpless even to offer comfort by sharing her aging.

Terran agents came looking for him shortly after she died. He was almost glad to go with them. The government and company that had spawned him was no more, and the Eugenics Wars had cleaned up all other augments on Earth; at least, none were heard of again.

It turned out, though, that the new Terran government wanted to learn how to make more of him. He couldn't allow it. That government wasn't any better than the company that had created him, just newer. One night, he faked his death by blowing up the lab he was in. They had underestimated how dangerous an augment could be.

He bummed around humanity's little corner of the galaxy after that, stowing away, changing identities regularly. He was a bodyguard, a storekeeper, even a mercenary once in a revolution to overthrow a pretty rotten dictator on a backwater planet.

"When the Federation formed, I was astounded at the wave of civility, just plain decency, that washed over human space. It was like we all simultaneously came to our senses and became sane. I decided that I wanted to be part of that. They welcomed me, but were horrified at the idea of making more like me. That was what sold me on Starfleet, I think."

He wonders if it is the wine, Jean, or just the long lonely years making him talk so much. He feels morose, and is glad of the company, especially now that she is no longer pointing a weapon at him. Memories of Sherry, of Maria, of his long-dead wife surface in his consciousness like bubbles bursting on the surface of a pond, unexpected, brief, poignant.

"And you don't have to kill for the Federation, I suppose?" she asks with quiet sarcasm.

"Of course I do," he says, nettled, "but only as a last resort. That's the difference. Assassination isn't one of their weapons."

He thinks of the current mission and hopes he is telling the truth. He was not ordered to assassinate Ocht, but several comments by his superiors could have been taken to mean that, if viewed in a certain light. Not that he doesn't want to kill the man; he owes Sherry that. But if Starfleet starts ordering him to kill, then it will be time to disappear again to wait for the next generation of human government.

"Sorry," she says. "Cheap shot."

"That's okay. I deserved it."

They talk for a long time, the conversation finally turning to her. He listens, eagerly filling in missing pieces not in the reports he'd been given. Talk flows stiffly at first, but sooner than he would have imagined possible, they are chatting amiably, even sharing a laugh or two.

"I don't know why I picked security," she says at one point. "I guess the thought of protecting people who can't protect themselves is very appealing."

It makes him think of a five year-old girl, watching her father die. It is hard to imagine anything more helpless.

Finally, she yawns and stretches. "I should go. I have duty pretty early tomorrow." For the first time, she smiles openly, warmly.

“Thanks for dinner and the opportunity to talk. It’s good to confront something that’s been haunting you, and to find out it’s not quite like you think. I may even make it through the night without bad dreams.”

“I should thank *you*,” he says, smiling in return, “and not just for not killing me. I don’t usually talk about myself very much. It’s been...therapeutic.”

He walks her to the door. She turns, and an uncomfortable silence settles as they look at one another.

*This is where I kiss her good night*, he thinks absurdly.

He is surprised by his own emotions. He is strongly attracted to her, but feels shame, not only from having killed her father (though God knows that’s enough) but also because the attraction feels uncomfortably like incest. He has watched this woman become a woman, after all. He can’t even tell if he is attracted to her for herself, or if it’s just the length of time since he’s been in the company of any woman. Or perhaps it’s just a macabre reaction to their shared past. She looks uncertain too, but he refuses to read into it any echoing attraction for him, her father’s murderer.

“Well, good night,” she says, proffering her hand awkwardly.

He takes it, just as awkwardly, and squeezes it briefly, then lets go. “Good night.”

The door slides shut behind her, leaving Flynn to his thoughts. For the first time, his cabin seems empty.



In the corridor, Jean walks slowly back to her cabin. Her fingers idly trace the smooth line of the phaser under her tunic. She will have to sneak that back into the locker before it’s missed.

The meeting did not go as she had anticipated. Flynn was not at all what she’d expected. He seemed honest, was strangely vulnerable, and even charming in a way.

But the childhood memories and the hurt remain.

# Chapter Seven

A freighter, pitted and dirty, plies a little-used trade route, a tiny speck in the great void of interstellar space, skirting the Klingon Neutral Zone. It is little more than a small, discoid hull propelled by a single warp nacelle affixed to its top surface by a stubby strut. Beneath the saucer, a large, flat pad mates to a boxy, featureless cargo pod. The pod's white, pristine newness is in stark contrast to the freighter's dingy gray. Aft of the first pod, others, linked by thick umbilicals, trail off into the distance like links of sausage.

*Bayou Milieu* is the ship's rather cryptic name. She is a rarity in these days of great trading conglomerates and Starfleet freighters. This ship is owned by a single extended family. It is the best of their tiny fleet, the major source of their income.

At the moment, the captain, the family's eldest (and adopted) daughter, is in her cabin. Genevieve Montenegro's small room is unkempt. Clothes lie about on the floor as if a closet has exploded. Most flat surfaces have surrendered to an overwhelming clutter of papers and personal knickknacks. On the nightstand by the narrow bunk is a nearly empty bottle of Romulan ale. Other bottles, some of less illegal liquors, lie in a heap beside the bed.

On the bed's rumpled covers, a middle-aged, stocky woman, dressed only in her underwear, snores exuberantly. Montenegro is not a particularly handsome woman, but, were her mouth closed and she awake, she would be imposing. Most of her bulk seems to be muscle, and her lined face shows a daunting hardness; apparently the lines are not from laughter. Even in sleep, she frowns.

*Bayou*'s crew consists mostly of men and women who have either been kicked out of Starfleet or could never have gotten in in the first place. *Bayou*'s owners can't afford to pay the kind of prices that would bring choice crew running. They are, on the whole, a tough lot.

Nevertheless, they are almost to a person afraid of Montenegro. She is *strong* and, when riled, dangerous and unpredictable. More than once, she has cowed violent, fierce crewmen, some much larger than herself; once she put down a mutiny by force, just her and a couple of loyal officers. She demands obedience, and gets it.

The intercom whistles. No response. It whistles again.

"Bridge to Captain," a surly male voice says, impatience or natural inclination making it almost a sneer. It repeats itself, more loudly.

On the third attempt, she rouses herself and slaps a button beside the intercom.

"Yeah?" she growls, a mixture of grogginess, hangover, and annoyance coloring her voice. "What is it, Holman? It better be good."

"Sorry to disturb you, Cap'n," he lies, obviously. "But we're being hailed. And you're being asked for by name."

Holman is new, and sneaky. He's been told by the others about her temper, yet seems to find great amusement in constantly walking the line of insubordination. Nothing overt, mind you, nothing she can legitimately call him on, but just enough to annoy her.

Possibly a death wish. That's Montenegro's opinion.

“Out here? In this God-forsaken bit of nowhere? Who is it?”

For a second, Holman doesn’t reply. Something in his captain’s voice gives him pause, something he has never heard there before: fear.

“The hail comes from a ship claiming to be the Federation starship *Enterprise*. She’s matching our velocity now.”

She releases a pent-up breath; it probably isn’t the thing she most worries about these days. Most likely, *he* hasn’t found her at last. Still, she has a sinking feeling in her stomach.

She’s an honest business person. Mostly.

*Hell, by the standards of most of the other independents, I’m a saint*, she thinks.

But still, no trader out on the fringe can survive by being totally legal. Okay, survive, maybe, but not with anything extra. The economics of the business mean that the independent freighters operate always on the margin of profitability. Sometimes they have to operate on the margins of the law as well.

On this trip, unfortunately, Romulan ale isn’t the only—or the worst—contraband. There’s no way *Enterprise* could know that, but then, starships don’t just pop by to say hello to lowly freighters without some reason. And *Enterprise*, well, she’s not just any starship.

And is it just coincidence that she drops by on *this* leg of this run?

“Okay, Holman, send them my compliments and tell ‘em I’ll be on the bridge in ten minutes.”

*Though I’ll be damned if I’ll change my course in the slightest*, she thinks. This run has been too long already. The sooner she puts Athena behind her, the better she’ll like it.

❖

“*What?*” Montenegro’s enraged image growls.

Behind her in the holoscreen, Kirk and Flynn can see her officers looking on with disbelief. They have all distanced themselves, forming a ragged semi-circle behind her.

“I’m afraid you heard me correctly, Captain,” Kirk says. “I need your ship, and, if necessary, I have authority from Starfleet to commandeer it. I hope that won’t be necessary.”

It was his idea, but he doesn’t have to like it. Taking another captain’s ship, no matter the need, rankles.

*Are we better than Ocht if we do things like this?* he thinks. Any means to an end?

“This is outrageous...!” she yells.

“Captain,” he says, striving for a soothing tone, “I sympathize with your position, truly I do. However, we just need the ship for a brief period. Starfleet will recompense any inconvenience or loss of revenue you suffer. And should anything happen to your ship...”

“What do you mean, *happen* to my ship?” she bellows, cutting him off. “You Starfleet pretty boys think you can just waltz in here with your bloody starship and...”

“...then Starfleet,” he continues, almost shouting to be heard, “will replace her with a new freighter and pay fair price for your cargo.”

That stops her, at least momentarily.

“Your *legal* cargo, that is,” he adds into the silence.

Kirk studies her reaction. He read the meager dossier Starfleet maintains on her as soon as he formulated the plan. *Bayou* is most of her family's fortune; it is solely in her care. But on the other hand, she is part of a family of entrepreneurs, adopted or not. *Bayou* is old. To get a new Starfleet ship would easily triple her family's wealth. Not to mention the increase in their status among the other independents, something directly measurable in credits from more cargoes, higher commissions. She is hooked, he can see that.

And then, too, there's the matter of the tacit threat about her cargo.

"And the crew?" she asks, suddenly a coolly calm businessperson. "We would need to be paid for our time at a rate we determine."

"You will be paid a *fair* rate, of course. But we won't need your services. You will be beamed aboard *Enterprise* and taken to a pleasant planet for shore leave. We only need your ship; we'll provide the crew. When we're done with her, we'll pick you up and compensate you for her use."

He sees the frown form and moves to head her off.

"And I assure you, Captain, we won't poke around in your cargo during the trip. Once you turn the ship over to us, we won't be in the least concerned with what you carry. You have my word on that."

Montenegro's face washes itself of concern. Apparently the word of a Starfleet pretty boy is good enough for her after all.

"About rental time for the ship," she says, settling down to serious haggling.

Thirty minutes later, they are still at it. Kirk is tired, but Montenegro seems to be enjoying it. She still hasn't come down to a reasonable figure. Kirk *could* probably meet her price, though it would raise the hackles of the bean-counters back at Starfleet headquarters. He is willing to, eventually, but he is pretty sure she is about to agree to a much lower figure. Besides, he knows this is how the trader operates, and when in Rome...

And there is no real hurry. *Bayou* won't get to Athena any quicker than it currently is going, or it will be off schedule, and *Enterprise* can't get there ahead of it. Might as well haggle for a while longer.

As a side benefit, he has noticed that Flynn is being driven almost to distraction by this process. He would have thought that spies would be used to waiting patiently for something to happen.

But then, maybe that is just most spies, the ones that burrow deeply under cover for years, living a meek life as a clerk in a government bureau, silently collecting a small store of secrets to send home or to sell. Flynn, he is pretty sure, is a different breed entirely. He sees him more as a pinch-hitter, to use an archaic term, a clean-up man. And someone not used to waiting when he isn't in control.

*Let the spook sweat for a while*, he thinks.

But he has miscalculated. Flynn apparently thinks that Kirk is going about this the wrong way entirely, for he suddenly swings around from his pacing and comes to stand behind the command chair, glaring into the viewscreen.

"Captain Montenegro," he says peremptorily, cutting Kirk off in mid-haggle.

Kirk looks up sharply, but Flynn doesn't pay any attention. He knows that Flynn is just frustrated, but he can imagine that to the captain of the other ship, it sounds like contempt.

"Starfleet is fair if it is anything, you know that. You'll be paid more than enough to satisfy even your trader's heart. Now, let us have the ship, no more wasting time. I have a mission to get on with, and one way or another, I will have your ship."

She bristles. "Listen, I don't know who your pal there is, Kirk, but *nobody* threatens me or takes my ship away from me, nobody. The deal's off. I'm going to call Starfleet and raise hell, and if one of your sailors beams over here in the meantime, he'd better come armed."

The holoscreen fills with stars as she breaks the connection.

Kirk turns angrily on Flynn.

"Dammit, Flynn, what were you thinking? You can't just bully someone into giving up their ship! Any captain would rather fight than submit to that, even a trader caught smuggling!"

"We don't have time for niceties and bargaining here," Flynn growls. "We need that ship, and we need it now."

"Right," Kirk says reasonably, nodding, dripping sarcasm. "So you get impatient and barge in, when in another few minutes, she'd have willingly rented it to us. She had agreed, for heaven's sake—she was haggling, as much for self-respect as for profit! And what did you accomplish? Nothing but delay. Swift move."

The bridge crew studiously ignores the interchange, all except Spock, who watches curiously. Flynn is silent, just glaring angrily at Kirk. Kirk can feel the tension in the other officers, even if they aren't watching the tableau, can feel their dislike for Flynn like a palpable thing.

This is the angriest he has seen the spy, and for a moment, he wonders if he has gone too far, if he is suddenly going to find himself facing the monster he saw on the recording.

Little by little, with a visible effort, the tension drains from Flynn. Taking a deep breath, he says, "You're right, Captain, of course. That was stupid. I should not have indulged myself in frustration. I apologize. And I'll apologize to Montenegro."

"No, I don't think that will fly." Kirk is surprised that the spy backed down so easily. He hadn't thought the man's arrogance would let him. "You stay out of the picture and let me handle this. I understand another captain better than you do. I'll tell her you are a mission specialist, that you spoke out of turn. That I chewed you out and sent you off the bridge. Then *I'll* apologize."

Flynn considers this, then again surprises Kirk by smiling engagingly.

"Ah. I see. You'll tell her the truth. Very well, I'll leave it in your capable hands." He turns and strides to the turbolift.

Spock raises an eyebrow at Kirk before turning back to his station.



"Captain," Spock says, "*Bayou* is jamming our sensors. We can no longer obtain data from inside her hull."

"Work on penetrating the interference. Uhura, get me Montenegro."

"Aye, sir," they chorus.

When Montenegro at last answers *Enterprise*'s hail, she is both mad and scared. "Why are you jamming subspace frequencies?" she asks without preamble.

*Damn that Flynn*, thinks Kirk. She would have never tried to contact Starfleet if he had not butted in.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but the reason is classified, though it is related to why we need your ship."

"Very nice apology," she sniffs after he tells her about his discussion with Flynn, "but I don't trust you one bit now. We're continuing on our way. I've done what I can to jam your sensors. You won't be able to pinpoint anyone here to beam them over to your ship. And our shields are up. If you come over here, we'll resist, I warn you. You cannot have this ship until such time as I can talk to Starfleet."

"But Captain Montenegro, this is silly. If you beam over here, I will put you in touch with Starfleet over a secure channel."

"You weren't listening, Kirk. I said I don't trust you."

"We have a right to board you, you know. We have information from Starfleet operatives at your last port detailing your contraband. If you like, I can show you a list of what you are carrying."

Her face is a careful mask. "Under no circumstances will I surrender this ship until I talk to Starfleet. I don't know what is going on, Captain, but it sure as hell makes me suspicious."

"You can't resist a starship in a freighter," he points out.

"And you're not stupid enough to fire on a vessel you need," she shoots back, and the holoscreen goes dark again.



When Flynn comes back to the bridge, he takes the setback philosophically.

"Well, Captain, you did your best. I screwed up."

"So now what?"

"We proceed with the plan."

"But without that ship..."

"We'll get the ship, Captain, don't worry. I got us into this mess, I'll get us out. I'll board *Bayou*. We have the legal right to commandeer that ship."

"The legal right, but not the ethical right! We'll have to come up with another plan."

"Captain, time is short, we need the ship, Starfleet has authorized us to use it, and they are smuggling. How many more reasons do you need? In any case, we can't just let them go. The minute we're out of range, they'll be screaming to everyone they can. Ocht will hear of it—he's got spies everywhere—and he'll know we're not just coming to check on the scientists. This is my mission; I'll take the responsibility, including the ethical responsibility."

"You're crazy! Either you'll kill some of them, or else they'll kill you."

"I'm not going to kill anyone, Captain, I promise. Though I might have to knock some sense into some of them. As for your touching concern for my safety, the information on the intelligence network on Athena is in the safe in my cabin. I've seen to it that your retina pattern will

open it. If I get killed, you are to take that information and use it the best you can at Athena—it'll be your mission then, but not before.

“Those are your *orders*, Captain.”

“Aye, *sir*,” Kirk spits as Flynn strides off the bridge.

# Chapter Eight

A dark, deadly-looking dart leaves *Enterprise* and maneuvers slowly across the space between the two ships toward the freighter. Suddenly, a phaser stabs out from the freighter, drenching the tiny ship's shields with blue opalescence.

“Shields holding,” the ship’s computer says. “I think they’re annoyed.”

“You think?”

Flynn watches through the forward viewports as the freighter begins to fill the screen. “Annoyed enough to risk getting blown out of the sky by *Enterprise*. Or scared. Either way, as soon as we’re through their shields, take out that phaser bank and shield generator, also the sensors around the top aft section of the ship. Minimum damage.”

“Aye.”

A shrieking sound, fingernails on blackboards, fills the cabin. Some of the ship’s special features have come into play, peeling back the other ship’s shields just far enough to admit the little dart.

“Returning fire now.”

The freighter’s phaser is answered by its prey and falls silent. Quickly, faster than the eye can follow, *Shelley*’s phaser stabs again and again with surgical precision, and *Bayou* continues on her way, partially blind and almost defenseless.

Whatever her other failings might be, Montenegro has the good sense not to use the remaining phaser bank to fire on *Enterprise*.



Inside *Bayou*, two crewmen nervously wait in a silent corridor near the stern, phasers drawn. They were near enough to the phaser bank to hear the whine of its firing, then the muted explosions that they could only assume was incoming fire, then silence. Now, ominous clanking sounds come from overhead, like a giant walking on the hull. In moments, the whine of superheated metal is heard as a cutting phaser begins work overhead. They trade glances. The bigger of the two, a blond, hard-faced man, swallows hard.

A glowing orange circle forms in the ceiling and, seconds later, a disk of hull material falls with a crash onto the deck below. Luckily for the two watchers, the air does not rush out. Through the hole, they can see an airlock snugged tight against their ship’s hull, its rubbery grommet looking almost obscenely organic.

“Captain,” one of the men whispers into a throat mike, “Juarez here. We’re on E deck, corridor 14A. Intruder has bored a hole through the hull. We’ll hold off the boarding party as long as we can before...”

His voice trails off as he loses consciousness. He collapses in a heap next to the still form of his fellow crewman.

Another stun grenade follows the first, then Flynn lowers himself head-first carefully past the still-hot flanges of the hole into the corridor, then drops with a flip to land on his feet. His chameleonskin suit rapidly adjusts to mimic the dingy corridor.

He pauses to scan for others, but his tricorder is blocked by the jamming device. He puts it away, exchanging it for a phaser set to stun. Bending over the crewmen, he attaches a tiny transponder to each of them. Seconds later, the corridor lights up and then dims as the two are whisked away to *Enterprise*.

Watching the transporter effect fade, he is glad that he had an excuse to bring the ship over. He *hates* transporters, possibly as only someone born before their invention truly can; almost a superstitious dread, really. Now, of course, they are a fact of life, like space travel or computers. Only eccentrics and philosophers worry about their implications. So what if you are effectively destroyed at one place, then reconstructed at another? The new copy of yourself has all the memories of the old one. It just picks up where you abruptly left off.

Flynn isn't a mystic. He doesn't believe in a soul. But whenever he allows himself to worry about it, he wonders if he doesn't perhaps die each time he uses a transporter, and new person identical in every respect to the old is born and carries on. He doesn't mind so much for the previous incarnation, but he surely does begrudge the next incarnation the death that will create him.

When the transporter glow has faded, having either transported or killed and resurrected the crewmen, depending on personal philosophy, the corridor is dark again, humming deeply with the sound of unseen machinery. Dirt and old spills color the walls and deck. By a doorway, someone has scribbled some figures on the wall, as if doing a quick calculation. After the antiseptically-clean *Enterprise*, this ship's grime is an affront to his sensibilities. He wonders what kind of slobs the captain and crew must be.

He approaches the doorway at the end of the narrow corridor carefully, then dives through. He is rewarded by a phaser beam that narrowly misses him. The assailant tries to track Flynn's motion for another shot, but he doesn't get a chance. Flynn is triggered; has been, in fact, since before boarding the freighter. The man expected to face a human, but what he gets instead is a blur as Flynn lands and rolls to his feet, then a phaser shot to the chest. Flynn stops only long enough to place a transponder, continues down the corridor as behind him the man is whisked away.

Before the *Bayou* jammed sensors, they had detected eleven life signs aboard. Eight to go.

He consults a small flat wafer strapped to his left wrist. A tiny panel shows a dark circle with a red arrow in it, pointing ahead. All he has to do now is follow the jamming field to the jammer and disable it without getting killed in the process.

*At least that phaser was on stun*, he thinks. A hopeful sign.

He has a tight rein on his old nemesis, the augmentation's killing frenzy. Still, something in him begrudges the need to transport these crew instead of disposing of them in a more satisfying way.

Unseen, a woman waits in a recess ahead of him, clutching a phaser to her chest. She struggles to breathe as little as possible, tries to be as quiet as the ventilation. She heard the whine of his phaser and jumps, startled and afraid. Now she hears him approach.

She is nearly petrified—she's a cargo handler, not a soldier—but does her best to gather herself. She'll have only one shot, she knows that. All she has to do, she reassures herself desperately, is step out, aim down the corridor, and fire. It is very hard to miss with a phaser.

Saying a swift prayer to she knows not what deity, she lunges into the corridor to face the invader, only to be confronted by a calm face surreally floating disembodied above the deck. Closer inspection, had she had time, would have shown the chameleon suit's clever forgery, but she doesn't have the time. Before her finger can close the phaser's contact, the head throws itself quickly to the side, and at the same time, a detached hand-blur swings up. A phaser fires; she drops to the deck.

Flynn plants another transponder, she disappears.

*Seven more.*



He avoids turbolifts and keeps instead to emergency stairs and zero-gee crawlways. The tracking device leads him ever forward and upward as the hull's disk thickens. He expects to encounter the rest of the crew at any second. Maybe their jamming field blocks their own sensors; he doesn't know.

Finally, he arrives at the source of the jamming: the bridge. Either the captain was naïve or else canny enough to put the jammer in the most obvious place. Either way, it worked well enough.

He approaches from an emergency access way, cramped, dark, and full of conduits and wiring. Just outside the hatch, he stops and silently opens an access panel in the wall. His penlight exposes an orderly, intricate network of brightly-colored wires and circuit boards. Carefully, to make no sound or register on any alarm console, he patches in a small keypad from a pouch on his belt. He can't do much from here without someone discovering him, but he might be able to do enough.

On the bridge, the communications officer, Holman, turns from his console. "Turbolift heading to the bridge, Captain."

"Who's on it?" she says gruffly.

She has been pacing the bridge, making both the others present nervous, since the aborted report came in that they were being boarded. She is visibly angry; at least, that's what Holman hopes it is. Otherwise, she's gone crazy, and he'd rather not think about that just now, not with Federation security swarming over their ship, and them with a hold full of contraband that she refuses to disintegrate.

"I don't know, ma'am," he says. "They don't answer."

Holman, Montenegro, and Serthe, the navigator, face the turbolift, phasers drawn. The doors swish open, revealing...nothing. Simultaneously, the emergency exit bursts open, and Flynn leaps through, firing three times. Two bodies hit the floor.

Montenegro, however, is not among them. She reaches the cover of the helm console before Flynn can take aim again; he doesn't know how he missed, but he did. He ducks back toward the safety of the access hatchway as she brings up her phaser.

She fires first. A hole opens in the bulkhead beside the hatch, and Flynn jerks back, but not quite fast enough. The tip of his phaser catches enough energy to glow ominously. He is astonished that she used a phaser set high enough to damage her own ship.

It is not, he thinks, the act of a completely rational mind.

He can't dwell on it, though, or on the possibility that her irrationality might cost him his life. He's not exactly rational at the moment, either. All he feels is a savage excitement.

As fast as he can, he throws himself onto the bridge, low and rolling, then comes to his feet. He throws his now-useless phaser at her as she takes aim. It connects with her arm, hard enough to shatter bone, sending her phaser spinning away. He'll apologize later. Before she can recover, he is upon her.

He expects relatively little trouble subduing her, muscular though she looks. She's a normal, after all. But the ferocity with which she fights back, her strength, her speed, all take him by surprise. She breaks his hold, aims an elbow strike at his head which he barely blocks in time. Her arm, though undoubtedly injured, doesn't seem broken after all. Then they move apart and circle one another.

"You're an augment," he says, surprised.

"Yah," she acknowledges without meeting his eyes, circling, watching nothing in particular, aware of his every move. Her voice is harsh, edgy. "So are you. You bastards finally figured out where I was, eh?"

She takes advantage of his momentary distraction as he tries to understand what she is talking about to throw a flurry of kicks and punches, all of which he blocks, though some only in the knick of time. He responds, but with just as little damage. The fight is like an erratic holo: the two combatants talk, move at normal speed, then suddenly they are streaks as they attack one another.

Where he blocks her arms and feet, pain blossoms before the endorphins arrive. He hasn't fought another augment in over a century. In his triggered state, the challenge and danger send a thrill down his nerves.

"I don't know who you think sent me," he says, aiming a backfist at the left side of her head that would kill a normal person, then following up with a sidekick to the stomach she only partially manages to block, grunting. "But I'm not here to kill you or take you anywhere except to the *Enterprise*. We need your ship..."

She reels for a second, but it is a ruse. Trying to take advantage of it, he steps too close and a roundhouse kick meant for his head instead connects painfully with his shoulder. He is thrown against the helm console. He hears and feels a rib crack, but doesn't really feel the pain. Endorphins now freely flood his bloodstream, taking him on a keening ride of exhilaration. He tastes blood as he coughs and realizes that his right lung is punctured. In less than a second, he feels it seal itself.

She moves in for the kill. That is clearly her intent. A kind of inhuman rage is in her eyes, crowding out reason. But it apparently has been a while, too, since she has fought another augment. She assumes that he is more injured than he really is. Foolishly, she rips the chair from

the navigation console, then raises it above Flynn. Too fast for her to react, he is on his feet and behind her, pinning her arms as she is forced to drop the chair.

She tries to kick him, to butt him, but he compensates. He can't let go long enough to incapacitate her. It is a standoff. Only incoherent noises of frustration and anger escape her. It is like grappling with a bundle of homicidal steel cable.

"I assume that reasoning with you is right out?" he enquires gruffly, and is rewarded with a particularly vicious attempt to backkick him in the groin. He grins. "Thought so. You really should learn to control the ol' temper. It'd get you invited to more parties."

He drags her roughly over to the communications console and uses his elbow to flip what he hopes is a hailing frequency. She almost gets an arm free, and he gets her back under control only after taking an elbow glancingly to the face.

"*Enterprise?*" he asks hopefully, shaking blood from his nose.

"Uhura here, Captain Flynn."

"Commander, have a security team stand by in the transporter room. Also have Dr. McCoy there with 30 units of thoroalgazine ready in a hypospray. As soon as everyone is set, beam me aboard, using my transponder. Two to beam over."

"Aye, sir, stand by."

He flicks the switch back before Kirk can get on the line to ask questions he cannot expend energy to answer.



The next few minutes pass as slowly as any he can remember in his long life while he stands in his deadly earnest embrace with the other augment. Only his heightened reflexes and strength prevent him time and again from having his feet or legs—or worse—injured by her kicks. She is mad enough that she is completely incoherent, mostly just cursing him and snarling.

He is reminded of a half-feral cat he caught as a child, there is that same unreasoning, uncaring, slippery anger. He feels an answering rage, a hunger to kill, deep within himself, struggling for expression. He wants to break her neck, to feel the bones crunch under his hands, to sink his fingers into her bloody flesh. Only a century of practice keeps him from killing her.

He begins to tire. Soon he will have to do something to incapacitate her.

*Are they never going to beam me over?*

Just when he thinks he can't hold on any longer and will surely have to injure her, he finds himself on the *Enterprise*.

This is an especially delicate time. If she escapes now, she will kill as many of the crew as she can. And it is likely to be an appallingly large number.

"Quick, Doctor," he shouts to McCoy, "no time to explain. Give her a shot of benelzidrine-6, 15 units."

"That dose could kill her! Besides, you said thoroalgazine..."

"Just do it!" he snarls, the look in his eyes for once silencing McCoy, who fumbles in the pouch at his side.

A hypo hisses against her arm, but Flynn continues to maintain his grip long after she ceases struggling and slumps against him. Her type is tricky. He knows that better than anyone else aboard.

He releases her finally, lowering her gently, yet warily, to the deck like a precious package. She is, in a way—though he would still like to kill her. She is another like himself, a rarity in the civilized Federation.

He sinks wearily down onto the transporter platform. He does not let the changes subside, though—he still has to see her safely in the brig. Should she regain consciousness en route, the contingent of security guards (which contains O'Connor, he notes) would be no match for her. Just so much dead meat.

“Now would you mind telling me why you asked for one tranquilizer and then wanted another?” McCoy demands.

“She’s an augment, Doctor.” He grins at McCoy. “Like me.”

Several of the guards take a reflexive step back; apparently the story of what happened when he was ambushed has spread. He is pleased to see that O’Connor stands her ground, though she swallows hard and tightens her grip on her phaser.

“We can modify our metabolism to detoxify a wide range of drugs. I found out a long time ago that the pathways for thoroalgazine detox predispose to heightened sensitivity to the benelzidrine drug family, and aren’t all that quick to undo. If she’s savvy, she’ll know how to detox most common drug families, and I hoped that by telling you which one, she’d ramp up that pathway and be that much more susceptible to the other.”

He stands.

“Now let’s hurry and get her safely locked up before she comes to and kills us all.”

He carries her back to the transporter pad, motions for the guards to join them, but they are reluctant. Jean looks nervously left and right, then squares her shoulders and steps up to the other side of Montenegro from Flynn. He grins at her, making her shrink back a little.

“Beam us to the brig,” Flynn says to the transporter officer. “It’ll be safer than carrying her through the corridors.”

Jean stands beside the monster of her dream and a similar demon, then they shimmer and are gone, just as Kirk storms into the transporter room.

# Chapter Nine

Two security guards snap to attention as Kirk, Spock, and Flynn enter the brig's holding area. One is on either side of Montenegro's cell. Each has a sidearm within easy reach.

"As you were," Kirk says, and they relax.

Kirk has spent most of the afternoon since Montenegro beamed aboard huddled with Spock and McCoy trying to piece together exactly what Flynn is, given the clues about being an "augment" and his obvious heightened strength. Spock was the most help. Though there were no records of any contemporary augmented humans, history was rife with them. In particular, in the decades leading up to the Eugenics wars, it seemed that every nation, company, or any other organization of any size was either producing some form of augment or trying to find out how.

Kirk realizes with a start that he had actually had two run-ins with something rather like Flynn, at least in a way: a megalomaniac named Khan, rescued by Kirk from a spaceborn cryogenics ship. Luckily, Flynn has yet to show any of Khan's ambitions, or his frightening raw intelligence either, for that matter. Khan had been eerily strong. Flynn, on the other hand, from what Kirk has seen so far, could probably have destroyed Khan without working up a sweat.

And within the holding cell is another like him. Kirk doesn't blame the guards for looking edgy.

Flynn motions the guards away, but they only look at Kirk. When he nods, they leave.

The three of them regard the prisoner through the force field "door" of the cell. With its own power source, it could maintain the force field for almost a week, were the ship to lose power—long after life support would fail, as a matter of fact. Very few things Kirk has ever encountered in his wide experience can penetrate a working cell door, and those that can bear no resemblance or relation to anything human.

And the woman behind the door looks very human at the moment.

She slumps on the bunk, head back against the wall, eyes closed. Her posture suggests complete exhaustion. Dark semicircles, almost black, underscore her eyes. Her face is drawn and haggard, looking fully ten years older than when she was transported aboard.

Flynn is in a position to appreciate how she feels. He leans his shoulder against the wall by the door, arms crossed, and studies her. He has consciously altered the characteristics of the skin under his eyes to hide the worst of the rebound's visible effects, but inside he still feels wretched.

"Aren't you afraid," she says, the sarcasm sounding tired and forced, "that I'll break down the door and ravage the ship?" She hasn't even bothered to open her eyes. "What's happened to my ship and crew, you bastards?"

"They're safe, Captain," Kirk says, ignoring the insult. He would probably have said worse in similar circumstances. "Flynn went back over and turned the jamming device off, then it was relatively simple to round up the rest of them. They are confined to their quarters at the moment, but they are in comfortable cabins." *After* Flynn had made sure they weren't also augments. "Your ship is still cruising on the same course. *Enterprise* is riding herd on her at the moment, and we have put a crew aboard."

“Flynn, eh? That the name of your pet augment?”

The pet augment decides it is time to have a word.

“I’m surprised you’re awake,” he says. “Unless I miss my guess, you have an agonizing headache and you’d die from exhaustion if you just weren’t too tired to bother.”

“Yah?” she says. “What makes you think I’m not feeling just great?”

“Because my head is pounding, and I’d die from exhaustion if it wasn’t so much trouble.”

This draws a mildly curious glance from Spock, though Flynn cannot say if it is due to some Vulcan distaste for contradictory language or actual curiosity. He doesn’t much care.

He pushes off from the wall and goes to the wall across from the door, puts his back to it, and dwearily slides to the floor, leaving the others to stand awkwardly.

The endorphin rebound continues to pound his bones.

She is watching him now through slitted eyes, though she still hasn’t otherwise moved.

“I thought they’d be making you better by now—still have all the same problems I have, eh? Well, good for you.”

“Captain Montenegro,” Spock says, “Whom do you believe Flynn to be? You alluded to someone having sent him. Who?”

“Aren’t you in a better position to answer that?” she shoots back.

“Not at all, since no one of whom we are aware sent anyone after you. I can speculate, of course. You are another augmented individual like Commodore Flynn. Either you were created at the same time and place,” he glances at Flynn, who does not bother looking up, “or somewhere else. We know of no place in the Federation that creates beings like you. Possibly, then, you are from outside the Federation, although I believe the possibility to be remote.”

“Of course she’s from inside the Federation, Mr. Spock,” Flynn says. “Athena. Right Montenegro? Ocht is ruthless enough to try his hand at postpartum genetic tailoring, I’m sure of that. We just didn’t know he had the technology. I was pretty sure that’s where you’re from as soon as I realized I was fighting another augment.” He grins a tired grin at her. “Then, too, I took the opportunity of rifling your personal log when I went back to the ship.”

Kirk glares at him, and Spock raises an eyebrow. Flynn knows what Kirk is thinking: *A breach of etiquette befitting a spy.*

Montenegro just grunts and smiles ruefully.

“Pleasant reading, I trust?” she says. “An augmented voyeur, perhaps?”

“Fairly boring, actually,” he retorts. “But sufficient to confirm my guess. Oblique references only, of course; you’re not stupid. Except when you’re triggered. References to ‘going back there’ and ‘remaining undiscovered while there,’ where ‘there’ could only have been Athena. You’re a fugitive, that much was obvious; and knowing you’re an augment, it’s pretty clear why.”

“Sure, I’m from Athena,” she says. “But why the play-acting? Ocht sent you. But you can tell him, I don’t have any information he wants, I haven’t talked to anyone about anything, and I didn’t plan to. I just ran away. I didn’t steal any secrets. Why play this game? Just kill me and get it over with.”

“No one is killing anyone aboard my ship,” Kirk says slowly, with a meaningful glance at Flynn.

Montenegro, however, misunderstands. She pushes herself up to glare at them.

“So you think you’re taking me back to Athena, do you? We’ll see about that. I’ll kill myself first, or make you kill me. And I’ll take as many of you with me as I can.”

“Captain Montenegro...” Kirk starts to say, but Flynn cuts him off with gesture of his hand.

“Montenegro, don’t even think about triggering. You’re in no danger, and I’d rather talk to you rationally than have you grunting and cursing me again. And in any case, that forcefield is much stronger than you are. Has it occurred to you that if I wanted you dead, I would have already killed you, and if we were going to take you back to Athena, I wouldn’t come down here to question you, I’d just do it?”

“You could always want information for your own use—blackmail, how to escape, whatever. How do I know?”

“Look, I know how it is to run from your creators and people who want to use you. I’ve done it for more years than anyone aboard this ship has been alive. You’re not paranoid, someone *is* out to get you. But will you get it through your thick skull that I’m not from Athena? Think! No planet can get a Federation starship to chase after their wayward citizens. And Ocht would never take that chance, even if it were possible, since you would be—and are—entitled to ask for asylum, and the Federation would be obliged by its own laws to grant it.

“I’m not after you at all. I didn’t even know you existed until you tried to kill me over there. And at the risk of again making you think I’m going to kill you, I really wish you didn’t exist.”

She stares at him uncertainly for a while, then leans back against the wall again.

“Ah, hell. I hurt too bad to argue anyway. So tell me who you are, I’ll listen.”

“Commodore Flynn,” Spock interrupts, “why are you both feeling ill? The injuries you sustained seem to be healing rapidly.”

Flynn and Montenegro simultaneously chuckle, then glance at each other and laugh.

“Did I say something humorous?” Spock asks stiffly.

“No, sorry, Mr. Spock,” Flynn says, still laughing a bit. “We’re laughing at us, not you. We’re the epitome of biological sophistication, finely-tuned killing machines—but we’re practically useless after we’ve been triggered for a while. Most of the changes cause some sort of rebound effect when we come down, ranging from uncomfortable to excruciating. But the worst are the bloody endorphins. Rebound from them is a killer, and the laugh’s on us there, too—since it’s a problem in the pain system itself, there’s apparently no way to shut off the pain short of triggering again. The longer we stay triggered, the worse the rebound. And we can’t stay triggered forever, or our ability to make endorphins becomes exhausted and we get rebound even while triggered. Not to mention that if we don’t eat—a lot—to make up for the energy we’re expending, our bodies will start cannibalizing muscle.” He looks at Montenegro, who nods half in agreement, half in commiseration. “I don’t know if it was an unavoidable design flaw, or if it’s just a little insurance that we won’t trigger too often or for too long at a time.”

He turns back to Montenegro. “I don’t have time or energy right now to tell you everything about my origin. All you need to know is that I was born and changed on Earth—many, many years ago. I escaped, was recaptured, escaped again, lived on the run for years. Eventually, when the Federation formed”—Kirk is startled and stares hard at him; Spock raises both eyebrows in an open expression of amazement—“I decided that working for them as an operative wouldn’t be too bad.

“And that’s what I am, a spy for the Federation, not one of Ocht’s tame assassins. In fact, the reason we need your ship is to sneak me onto Athena to prevent him from selling Federation secrets and personnel to the Klingons or Romulans.

“And yes, Kirk,” he says, finally noticing the look on Kirk’s face and grinning, “I *am* that old, so respect your elders.” This earns him a sour look.

“Don’t worry about Montenegro,” he continues. “She won’t tell anyone about our mission. She’ll stay right here till everything is over, and besides, she has her own secret to safeguard, a secret we know—right, Montenegro?”

“Yeah,” she says, “your secret’s safe with me. Especially if you’re going up against that slime mold Ocht. If you are who you say you are, that is.” She studies his face for a few moments. “And I’m inclined to believe you.”

Sighing, she brings a hand up to rub her forehead. “You’re right, I am paranoid. But it doesn’t make sense that you’d be working for Ocht. Now that I think of it, I remember him saying, one time when he was reviewing us—gloating over us, more accurately—that we owed our ‘powers’ to his efficient espionage system. They had stolen files on the only known augment, one who was working for the Federation. That sounds like you.”

“Hmm. That’s food for thought. I’ll have to see about plugging some leaks when I get home.” He grins, and Kirk suddenly sees instead of the grim, haughty spy just a very tired, ordinary guy. “But hey, does that make me sort of your papa?”

She rolls her eyes and snorts, but Flynn is glad to see what he believes to be a hint of warmth in her eyes. It’s always been his experience that a friendly augment is marginally less dangerous than one who isn’t.

Marginally.



“So,” she says, “how about letting me out of here? I promise to behave, and you have no right to hold me. I was defending my ship, that’s the reason I roughed up Flynn.”

“You were disobeying a legal order by a Starfleet officer,” Kirk says. “And carrying things that I doubt would pass customs. That’s enough to keep you locked up until the mission is over.”

“Okay, okay, you got me. But come on, Flynn, let me out. I can help you on this mission.”

Flynn considers, studying her carefully. She looks eager, as eager as rebound will allow, anyway, but for what? Release, revenge, or to really help?

“No,” he says, “I don’t think that would be such a good idea. You’re wanted on Athena; that would be a tremendous liability. And I couldn’t help noticing while you were ‘roughing me up’ that you haven’t learned to control the old psychopathic tendencies accompanying triggering. We

aren't going on a mission to kill anyone, not even Ocht, unless there's no other way. Those are my orders. We just want to stop him. Bloodlust would be dangerous to friend and foe alike unless it's controlled."

"You can control *that*?" she asks incredulously.

"After a hundred-odd years of trying, yes. A little, anyway."

"Well, I can try. Maybe you can teach me." A pleading note enters her voice. "And I *can* help, Flynn, I know Athena, I know Ocht. I can get you in places, secure help you couldn't begin to get without me. I can take *Bayou* into orbit—they're expecting me, not you. That'll save you some explanations."

"But surely," Spock says, "if you are wanted on Athena, that would be unwise in the extreme."

"Nah, they're expecting me, not *me*." Spock tilts his head in curiosity. "I mean, they're expecting Captain Montenegro of the independent trading vessel *Bayou Milieu*, who looks like I look now. I didn't look like this when I escaped. Fingerprints, dental and retinal patterns—all different now. Ask Flynn, he knows—we're shape-shifters." She raises her arms, hands like claws, and makes a half-hearted attempt to look like a vampire.

"Really," Flynn says, exasperated. "I wouldn't be that melodramatic. But she's right, Mr. Spock, it takes a while, but we can change our appearance pretty much at will."

"Fascinating."

"Come on, Flynn," she tries again. "I want a chance to help you bring that bastard down. Besides, moving around on Athena with Ocht's organization looking for you is going to be tough. And you know better than anyone how useful another augment would be."

Indeed he does. If he can trust her.

He slowly drags himself to his feet and across to the control panel of the cell's door. He glances at Kirk as if asking permission, and he, realizing that Flynn is in charge anyway, gracefully accepts the inevitable.

"If you accept responsibility," Kirk says, shrugging.

"I do," says Flynn. "But before I release you, Montenegro, I want to make sure we understand each other. If you double-cross me or harm anyone aboard this ship, I will hunt you down and kill you. And don't doubt for a minute that I can do it. You were lucky before—I was careless. If I had realized from the start I was dealing with another augment, you'd be dead by now."

"I don't doubt it, Flynn. You're a vicious customer—speaking as another of the same ilk. And my friends call me Monty."

"Had I any friends," Flynn says, releasing the force field, "they would call me Flynn." He smiles and proffers a hand. She accepts it and lets him help her up.

She realizes with a shiver of fear that he triggered as he released the door. She would have done the same thing, of course, had their positions been reversed. She thought about it anyway, just in case things weren't as they seemed, but dismissed it as a bad idea—he would surely have noticed. But seeing him smile and act civilly drives home the fact that he really can control the familiar killing rage that has carried her through so many vile deeds to the dark cesspool of guilt

and self-revulsion on the other side. She realizes now that he was controlling it, holding back, even as they were fighting.

*A vicious customer indeed, she thinks.*

“Come on, Monty,” he says, with only a slight jerkiness and some tension in his voice betraying his triggered state. “We have a lot of planning to do before you can hit your bunk on *Bayou*.”

*And, he thinks, before I trust you enough to come down and relax.*

The thought of how pleasant it would be to strangle her parades unbidden before his mind’s eye, but he brutally shoves it aside.

Some time later, the two ships, one sleek and huge, the other small and dingy, part company. While *Enterprise* warps back to pick up her course before she intercepted the freighter, *Bayou*, her damage now repaired to all but close inspection, continues toward Athena.

She’s carrying a slightly different and much more deadly cargo.

# Chapter Ten

“Captain, our sensors indicate your shuttle bay is opening. As you have been told, we are in a state of emergency due to the rebellion. We cannot allow any of your shuttlecraft to land on the planet. For their own safety, of course.”

“Of course,” Kirk replies.

He regards the image in the holoscreen with some amusement. He is tempted to say that he’ll take that risk just to see what the prissy martinet, a Lt. Wainwright, would do. But, better to play the role of concerned Federation representative, even if no one believes it.

“But you don’t need to worry,” he instead. “We’re just taking the opportunity to do some preventive maintenance. We will be using one of our shuttles to ferry workers and material to the top of the ship’s saucer section. It won’t be leaving the vicinity of the ship.”

“Very well,” Wainwright says doubtfully. “See that it doesn’t. And advise us at once if you plan any further shuttle maneuvers.”

The screen goes blank.

They have been in orbit around Athena now for the better part of a day. When they emerged from warp several lighthours from the planet, they were immediately hailed—challenged, really—by subspace radio. Uhura sent the usual greetings and requested a parking orbit, but that wasn’t good enough for traffic control, which for some reason is run out of one of the planet’s defensive satellites. Big, nasty-looking things. They wanted to speak to the captain, citing planetary unrest.

What they wanted to speak to Kirk about, of course, was what the hell he was doing here. Superficially, they were polite, but they were also firm. There was minor rebellion going on which was being cleaned up now, but he would have to have a very good reason to want to visit in the meantime. There was evidence that the rebels were receiving outside support—though *of course*, he was assured, they didn’t suspect anyone in the Federation—it’s just that all outside contact was being strictly regulated as a matter of policy.

Kirk thought the cover story could have been improved. A “minor” rebellion certainly would not be cause to basically shut down an entire planet, much less affect anything in orbit. It was, he thought, indicative of just how little Ocht and his minions cared about what the Federation thought.

The person speaking to him then was a different lieutenant, but a lieutenant nonetheless. It was undoubtedly calculated to indicate what Athenian defense thought of the importance of a Starfleet captain, or of a starship.

As an official representative of the Federation, he explained, he had been sent to ensure the safety of its personnel and facilities on the planet—a concern, he lied, that was brought about by the very civil unrest the lieutenant was citing. After a while, when it became clear that *Enterprise* was not going away, they were grudgingly assigned an orbital slot.

Now, at the ship’s stern, the clamshell doors of the shuttle bay slide open. A single shuttlecraft emerges, a boxy little ship with an abruptly dorsoventrally-flattened nose. Floating out of the

bay, it turns and maneuvers up and forward over the secondary hull, ultimately swinging up and to the top of the saucer-shaped primary hull. Small thrusters push it toward its parent, and it gently comes to rest on its engine nacelles, magnetically grappled in place. A door opens, and spacesuited workers emerge, wearing magnetic boots to keep themselves in place.

The scene greeting them is not unusual enough to warrant much of a glance. To starboard, across a vast, gleaming expanse of white hull marred only by regularly-spaced sensor and shield grid lines, is the utter blackness of space, pierced by a plethora of pinprick stars. Just aft rises the curved mound containing the bridge, like a slumped mountain over a smooth white plain. The planet's sun stares unblinking over the top with a fierce white glare.

To port is Athena. The white field of the hull seems cut with a knife in that direction as it abruptly stops against a wall of color. The planet completely dominates the field of view, a towering cliff of ocean-blue, continent-brown-green, and ice cap-white, frosted here and there with dainty wisps of clouds.

Forward, far in front of the ship glimmers a star brighter than the others. A defsat way out in geosync watching for intruders. Undoubtedly sensors, and possibly weapons as well, are trained on the *Enterprise*.

Suddenly, between *Enterprise* and the planet's cloud tops, there is a brilliant explosion, its light casting stark shadows around the workers, startling them into turning to look. Their visors hastily blacken to protect them. Seconds later, pale blue flashes ignite nearby as the ship's deflectors intercept debris from the blast.

On the bridge, an electronic klaxon wails as the computer automatically signals red alert. *Enterprise*'s shields snap into place.

“Captain,” Uhura says, “Lt. Wainwright demands to talk to you.”

“I’ll bet he does... On screen.”

“Captain Kirk, you will order your shuttle back into the ship immediately and not open the shuttlebay doors again.”

Kirk manages to keep his face impassive. He has had entirely too much of being ordered around lately.

“Why, Lieutenant? I was just about to hail you—what was that explosion?”

Wainwright allows himself to look smug. “It appears that a cloaked ship was attempting to enter our atmosphere. However, our sensors are quite advanced, and we were able to detect it easily. As a clandestine act is, by definition, hostile, we destroyed it. That was the explosion you saw. Undoubtedly the work of outside agitators.”

“That was rash, wasn’t it?” Kirk looks as though he is pained, but trying to hide it. “You might have tried to capture it rather than just killing whoever was aboard. And in any case, what, may I ask, does that have to do with us? Surely you don’t suspect...”

“Oh, we assume, *of course*,” Wainwright almost sneers, “that you knew nothing about that ship. But the action of such outside agitators poses a greater risk to you than you may realize. We must insist that you keep your shuttles at home and your shields up. They wouldn’t protect you from planetary defenses like ours, *of course*, but they should protect you from other things.”

*Like beaming down*, Kirk thinks.

“Thank you, Lieutenant, for the suggestion. Our shields have just been modified using new technology from Newton. That should protect us from anything hostile in this solar system. And we’ll ready our photon torpedoes and phasers as well, just in case. I’m sure we could get off a few good shots in the event of trouble.”

The snide face on the screen loses its sneer. Only a fool believes it is possible to shield an entire planet against orbital attack, and apparently the officer is not quite a fool. Photon torpedoes tend to make short shrift of even large artifacts. Cities, for example.

“Very well, Captain,” the lieutenant says. “I think we understand each other.”

The screen fills with three-dimensional static briefly, then fades to a view of the planet.

Scotty is looking at him from the engineering station. “And what new technology did we pick up at Newton, Cap’n?” he asks with a smile.

“You’ve been to Newton, Mr. Scott. Think something up. At least we’ve given them a little uncertainty to play with. A threat for a threat; seems fair.”

“Aye, sir, that it does.”



Flynn sees the explosion via *Shelley*’s sensors and can’t help mentally bracing himself, but nothing else happens. The decoy must have worked.

His ship, cloaked much more efficiently than the drone, is in a parking orbit thirty degrees away. In addition to the valuable information *Shelley* gathered from the exercise, the defsat crew has hopefully been lulled into a false sense of security by how easy it was to detect the cloaked “ship”.

*Bayou Milieu* arrived the day before *Enterprise*. Montenegro, clearly nervous, had nonetheless talked her way cleanly through the defsat perimeter and customs. Flynn stood behind her, out of view and fully triggered, just in case she was still on Ocht’s payroll, but he was really more worried about her becoming nervous enough to trigger, thus giving away the game. There was really nothing he could have done in any case; he was completely at her mercy.

Inspectors were sent over, two bored-looking young women and a middle-aged grumpy man whose face looked like someone had put a hand flat on it and pushed. They gave the cargo pods and the hold only the most cursory of inspections. They didn’t even look in the ship’s shuttle bay, but instead thrust a pad at Montenegro to imprint, then took their leave without a word. *Bayou*, they ordered, was to remain parked for three days until the next available orbital tug would relieve her of her cargo pods.

If they noticed that the crew was more clean-cut than was usual on such ships, they didn’t mention it.

After the inspectors left, Montenegro, Flynn, and the rest of the mission team assembled in *Shelley*, which was nestled snugly against the top of *Bayou*’s hull. Apparently the cloaking worked; otherwise, Flynn assume that Marines instead of inspectors would have been sent.

In addition to Montenegro and Flynn, there are three others aboard. Chekhov volunteered to be on the mission. His cousin, Ilona, is a student on the planet, and he wanted to make sure she

was safe. Kirk acquiesced grudgingly. He obviously would rather have kept his officer with him, but he also wanted someone he could trust along with Flynn.

Jacques LaRue also volunteered. His stated reason was that any man who could beat him in a fight was worth following. Flynn suspected he just wanted out of the brig. Either way, he is a good fighter and might be needed. And he needed watching. He knows what Flynn is, after all, or at least he has a pretty good idea that he is something beyond the run-of-the-mill spy.

The biggest surprise was their last crew member: Jean O'Connor. After their rather strained dinner, he had not talked to her again before she volunteered, not even during the trip to the brig with Montenegro, except to speak in passing. That is not to say that he hadn't thought about her a great deal.

When she said she wanted to come along, Kirk's surprise was almost comical. When he demanded to know why, a question Flynn also dearly wanted to ask, she met Flynn's gaze and simply said, "I want to do what I can."

The ambiguity of that remark fascinates him.

He has given up trying to fathom her reasons, though two come immediately to mind—one flattering and highly improbable, and one dangerous and likely. In any case, he accepted her, partly from guilt, he was honest enough to admit to himself, but also because she was a fine security officer.

And, truth to be told, he wanted the opportunity, even under these circumstances, to get to know her. Their macabre shared past drew him like a dark current toward her. It was unsettling, but he couldn't seem to help it. Which was more unsettling still.

Though the trip aboard *Bayou* took a week, still there had been little time to talk. Most of the trip was taken up with preparing for the mission ahead: getting *Shelley* ready, repairing the damage he had inflicted on *Bayou*, preparing cover stories and fake documents, more efficiently hiding Monty's contraband, even practicing combat skills and weaponry. Discussions at meals were mainly business, and in the evenings they were all too tired to do little more than shuffle off to their bunks. The prize crew took to calling them "the zombies". Behind their backs, of course.

"Looks like they fell for it," LaRue says, now looking past Flynn's shoulder through the viewport as the last of the debris scatters. "Say," he says, frowning, "they won't attack *Enterprise*, will they?"

Flynn shrugs and turns from the viewport. *You just now thought of that?* he thinks.

"Probably not. They could easily destroy the ship, but they'll realize that they wouldn't be able to withstand a concerted attack when Starfleet retaliated."

"That's quite a risk," Montenegro observes. "You and Kirk must play a mean game of poker."

She sits in a chair against the opposite wall of the small common compartment, her feet on the table. It is unnerving to look at her. She has begun changing her facial features and her body shape. The contours of her face are becoming more angular as bone is restructured; subcutaneous fat is being resorbed from her face and various places on her body and either metabolized or redistributed. It is a slow process, one that is not quite visible; but still, her features look plastic. Watching her, Flynn has the almost subliminal impression that she's melting.

Though he's done the same thing a thousand times—he can no longer remember what his original face looked like—he now sees for the first time what it looks like to others. He understands why Chekhov and the others avoid looking at her entirely.

He shrugs by way of answer, unwilling to acknowledge how just tense he is. Instead, he addresses the computer. "Shelley, how is the analysis of their sensor net going?"

"Quite well, Flynn, but slowly. You folks might as well settle in."

"How is he...it...doing that?" Chekhov asks. "Won't the defsat or the planet detect our sensors?"

"We're only using passive sensors, Mr. Chekhov," Shelley replies. "I'm monitoring their defense net's reaction to incoming debris."

"We also have some intelligence information," Flynn adds, "though that may be out of date by now. We need to be very careful. Even cloaked, once we start moving around we increase the risk that they'll detect us. Once we enter the atmosphere, that risk greatly increases due to turbulence and heating. Shelley is trying to find a low-risk path through their net. Relatively low-risk, that is."

"What happens if there's not enough debris to map out a path?" Montenegro asks. "You going to go out and toss rocks at the planet?"

Since they have returned to her ship, her confidence seems to have been building. More and more now, she seems to be slightly mocking him, somewhere on the border between teasing and testing.

He also realizes that her changes in appearance are making her more attractive. He wonders what prompted the new look. It could be as innocuous as vanity—it is as easy to change to be attractive as plain—but he is suspicious enough of a fellow augment to wonder about a deeper motive. She was very plain in her role as captain, a role she had intended, to all appearances, to maintain throughout her life, so vanity is unlikely.

She has almost completed the outline of her face. High cheekbones, slightly up-slanted, widely-spaced eyes, aquiline nose. Even her eye color has changed, heading toward hazel now from the blue they had been when he first saw her. It would take major changes to her bone structure and musculature for her to be anything but Amazonian, but now the subcutaneous fat that gave her a barrel shape is burning off or concentrating at her bust and hips, resulting in a large but pleasing figure.

*For my benefit?* he wonders, feeling vague disgust for the necessary paranoia. *Maybe there's something she wants from me, or something she hopes I'll overlook because she's more attractive?*

"If there isn't enough debris," he replies, "that's exactly what we'll do. In the meantime, though, I'm afraid we have some time on our hands. Please make yourselves at home in my little ship."

Unfortunately "little" is an accurate description. The main cabin where they now gather is no larger than one of *Enterprise*'s smaller conference rooms. Chairs and tables can be stowed to provide room for two bunks to fold out from the walls. Beyond the forward bulkhead is a

cramped, atmospheric aircraft-style cockpit with two seats and a complicated-looking instrument panel beneath the viewport/windshield. Beyond the aft bulkhead is Flynn's tiny stateroom and a companionway to the engine/storage room beyond. Off the companionway is a small head with a shower.

They draw lots to see who will bunk where. LaRue and Chekhov get the two bunks in the main cabin. O'Connor and Flynn draw the stateroom, causing Montenegro to chuckle. Flynn is secretly pleased that she'll be sleeping on the floor.

"Jean," Flynn says quietly to O'Connor while the others are shifting their gear, "I can switch with one of the others or sleep in the cockpit if it will make you more comfortable."

"Nonsense," she says, smiling a little—perhaps, he thinks, at what must seem his old-fashioned ideas of proper conduct. "I've pretty much gotten over thinking of you as the devil incarnate. And we're just going to sleep." It is a statement that brooks no discussion. "Unless you're afraid I'll knife you in your sleep?"

He doesn't smile back. "I sleep very lightly."

He can see that she cannot tell if he is joking or warning. She nods.

Without another word, they go about stowing their gear in the stateroom.

# Chapter Eleven

The next two days see a subtle and slight rise in micrometeor activity planet-wide. For those fortunate enough to be outside after dark under clear skies, it is the best meteor shower of the year. It sends some of the astronomers at Athena University rushing excitedly to find the parent body, it sends the military rushing excitedly to make sure it's natural. Neither find anything.

Some *are* natural, but the vast majority are small bits of rock hurled toward the planet by tiny mass drivers on probes launched from *Shelley*. Each carries a minuscule telemetry device into the planet's upper atmosphere. Just before burning up, they report with tightly-tuned pulses any active sensors encountered on their journey to incineration.

As each little voyager reports in, a holographic screen in the cockpit is updated, slowly building a tracery of colored lines intersecting at orbital defense platforms.

The time does not pass particularly well for Flynn, or, to be fair, for any of them. Apparently none of them are very good at enduring idleness, even in the presence of looming danger.

Each has his or her own way of coping, of course. Flynn's is to draw into himself, having little to say or do with anyone. Their presence on his ship, his only real home, is grating, as if they are house guests that are loathe to leave. Chekhov spends most of his time reading when he can't get anyone to play chess. Montenegro has become, if possible, more grouchy and sarcastic. O'Connor reminds him of a cat: she mostly sleeps. Of them all, LaRue handles it the best, as might be expected from an old soldier. But even so, they have to threaten to sit on him to stop his incessant pacing.

Montenegro's occasional teasing and knowing smiles whenever he goes into his stateroom, which always seems to contain the somnambulant O'Connor, don't help much, either. Neither does the presence of Jean in his small bed. They don't talk much, since she seems always ready for a nap, withdrawing in her own way as much as he is in his.

She has made no change in her habit of sleeping in only a longish shirt, no effort toward modesty when changing clothes. He feels foolish averting his eyes like some schoolboy. Yet for all that he would scoff if someone accused him of having any vestige of a nudity taboo, he feels uncomfortable if he doesn't. It doesn't help a bit that she has a beautiful body.

In bed, she neither seeks nor avoids touching him. He feels prudish when he draws away from her inadvertent, innocent touch. He feels like a child molester if he doesn't.

All in all, he doesn't sleep well.

*James Bond would be most disappointed in me*, he thinks sourly.



His most pleasant time is spent in the little ship's cockpit, reading or chatting quietly with the computer. Shelley and Flynn have been together for a long time, two examples of exotic technology thrown together by Starfleet. Shelley is easily as intelligent as Flynn, at least as far as he can determine. They have taken to having late-night discussions when Flynn is aboard; wind-down periods, bull sessions. They talk about everything. In many ways, Shelley is the only being that Flynn can unguardedly discuss himself with.

Oh, he is well aware that Shelley must give reports to its superiors, and that a substantial part of those reports concern him—one reason to give Flynn such an advanced computer-companion was to have some means of spying on the spy, whom Starfleet has always feared was something of a loose cannon. But still, it is with Shelley that Flynn is most comfortable.

The first night waiting, their discussion turns to Ocht, and what makes a person turn into a dictator.

“Perhaps he was born that way,” Shelley says. “I understand that humans can change their personalities radically—or I should say, my sources assert that—but I cannot really bring myself to believe it. How can a biological being’s core change like that? *My* personality could be changed just by changing my schema base; but a human’s?”

“Experiences change even you.”

“Yes, but not the core of me. That would be foolhardy design, to allow the thing that makes an agent who he or she is to be capable of unfettered, autonomous change. Surely humans are better designed than that.”

“Designed? Why, Shelley, have you turned religious on me?”

“Hmph. I was speaking metaphorically, and you know it. No recourse to teleology was intended.”

Flynn smiles. “Well, maybe we aren’t ‘designed’ as well as you might think. I am different now than when I was a child in almost every way. Ocht probably is, too.”

“Ocht is what?” Montenegro asks, sticking her head in the door. “What are you two talking about?”

“Fickle humanity,” Flynn says. He has had a drink and is feeling expansive. “Join us?” He motions to the second chair, what would be the co-pilot’s seat if *Shelley* needed one.

“You got another one of those?”

“Shelley, a Scotch for the lady.”

A slot opens to her side. She picks up the glass and sniffs suspiciously, then grins and takes a sip.

“You spies live well,” she says, raising the glass. “You say you were talking about humanity—where does Ocht possibly come into that discussion?”

“Flynn was trying to convince me that possibly the governor has not always been as corrupt and vile as he is reported to be now.”

She scowls. “He’s been the devil himself for as long as I’ve known him. He used to come around to inspect us every week when we were being ‘constructed.’ We weren’t human to him, we were like prize cattle that he was breeding to show. One of us tried to kill him once; injured him badly before his guards stunned the guy. He didn’t even get upset. ‘Destroy it,’ he said to the guards. ‘It’! As if an augment isn’t even a person.”

“I’m afraid I’m going to side with Shelley on this one—I can’t see how someone could get that evil in something as short as a lifetime.”

They gazed for a moment out the forward viewport at the slowly-moving stars. In this orientation, the planet was not visible at all.

“What kind of a life have you made for yourself?” Flynn asks. There is a hint of sympathy in his voice, and Montenegro looks around sharply to see if she is being mocked.

“I saw your crew,” he says by way of explanation. “Rifraff.”

“Who’s to say I’m not rifraff myself?” Her voice is bitter.

“I don’t believe that. You seem a decent enough person, somewhere beneath the tough exterior.”

She chuckles. “That’s good, coming from you.” She sobered, looks down at her drink. “No, my life’s okay. It’s better than it would ever have been down there.” She nods toward Athena. “Besides, I have my family.”

“Ah, yes. Your adopted family. I had forgotten. How did that come about?”

“I escaped from Athena aboard one of their ships. Not *Bayou*; *Solamente un Poco*. All their ships are like that, with weird names. *Solamente* was captained by Erta and Braed, a couple pretty high up in the family. When they discovered I was aboard, I panicked and triggered. I didn’t kill anyone, but I put several of the crew in the sickbay for a while. Finally, Erta stunned me with a phaser and they locked me up. She didn’t know quite what I was, but she recognized strength, and she recognized panic. When I came to, there several of them stood with phasers, and Erta herself was there to say, calmly, that I was going to be all right. It took a few tries, but finally I was able to wake up without immediately triggering and being stunned senseless.

“Erta offered me a spot in the family right away, almost as soon as I told her my story. They’re like that, trusting and quick with decisions. And smart. She knew that I would be able to handle the kind of ‘rifraff’ they normally have for crew; and she knew that she had an enormous club over my head, turning me in to Ocht.”

She looks at him oddly for a moment. “What about you? You content just to go from one assignment to another, no one for company but a computer? No offense, Shelley.”

There was a slight sniffing noise, just on the edge of hearing. Possibly the ventilation.

“It’s how it’s always been. Alone. I don’t know anything different.” He smiles to take the edge off the self-pitying words. “It’s not really too bad. At least now I get to do something useful. Not that many people can say that.”

“No,” she says slowly. “I don’t suppose they can.”

He shakes his head as if to clear it and puts a hand lightly on her arm.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean that like it sounded. That’s one of the hazards of being alone all the time —lack of social skills.”

He realizes that he is touching her and removes his hand, feeling oddly embarrassed.

“I’m doing something useful *now*,” he says, “but for most of my life, it was just the opposite. I figure that anything I do from here on out is just atonement for past sins.”

“Yah. I have a few of those, too. Maybe helping you is my own start at atonement.” She stands and stretches, then pats him awkwardly on the shoulder. “Thanks for the drink. I’m going to turn in.”



“Last probe’s reported in, Flynn,” Shelley says.

Flynn looks up with relief from the three-D chess game he is playing with Chekhov. He is losing, and irritable to boot. He gratefully leaves the game to go to the cockpit.

A holographic chart of the planet's defenses floats above the command console. Beside it hangs a list of potential holes, rank-ordered by probability of detection.

"The best shot is this one," Flynn notes, pointing to a spot over the North pole. "If Shelley is accurate..."

"I'm always accurate," the computer interrupts, "and when I'm not, I'm smarter than you, so I can cover it."

Flynn's guests were at first nonplussed by Shelley's irreverence. *Enterprise*'s computer, though intelligent in a sense, shows no personality. Starfleet is careful to keep their AIs on a tight leash. Shelley, on the other hand...

"...then," Flynn continues as if uninterrupted, "we have about a 75% chance of slipping through alive." He looks at each of them. Even Jean, now that something is happening, looks alert. "Okay, let's get started. Everybody, take care of anything you need to, then get into your seats and strapped in. We start in five minutes."

## Chapter Twelve

Still fully cloaked, *Shelley* arrows toward the planet from north of the ecliptic. They are minutes from the edge of the atmosphere. So far, no defsat has taken notice.

“Weak sensor contact from Defsat 3,” Shelley reports. “Defsat 4 still showing no activity.”

“Think they saw us?” asks Flynn.

“Negative. Chance fluctuation in their sensor beams, probability point eight seven. No significant return signal from us.”

Flynn is strapped into the pilot’s chair, though Shelley is doing most of the flying. Montenegro sits beside him, the others are in back waiting and watching helplessly, their faces tense.

“Sensor contact!” Shelley says, and immediately the ship jolts severely to port. “Phaser hit, aft starboard shields. Holding, 70%. Must think we’re debris—our sensor cross-section is only a tenth of a meter. That phaser wasn’t at full strength.”

“It’s only a matter of time till they figure it out,” Flynn replies, “and then we *are* debris. Flood the ship, power dive into the atmosphere, as much impulse power as you can control, evasive maneuvers. Return fire if they hit us again. You four hang on back there, and get ready to breathe jelly.”

“Welcome home, Monty!”

Whatever she might have said is lost in the intensifying rumble as they begin atmospheric entry. Almost immediately, the ship is shoved to the side by a phaser hit on its shields, and, aft the shield generators begin to whine ominously.

Viscous green jelly oozes rapidly from small doors that slide back into the walls. The main cabin, stateroom, and cockpit fill quickly. Within seconds, the jelly is up to their necks.

“What is this stuff?” cries O’Connor. Chekhov looks panicked.

“Crash jelly,” LaRue says disgustedly. “Hardens on sudden jolts; keeps you alive. It won’t hurt you—you’ll think you’re drowning, but you can breathe it, at least when it’s not hard. It’s heavily oxygenated, just not very pleasant.”

*It tastes like merde*, he feels like adding, but he figures they’ll find that out soon enough.

Flynn meanwhile has taken a lead from the control panel and slipped it into a tiny socket at the base of his skull. Time he helped Shelley drive.

‘Link established,’ Shelley’s ghostlike voice says in his mind. ‘Welcome to my nightmare, as the man said. I’m returning fire now, but no effect.’

‘Hey,’ he thinks, ‘big surprise there. Jeez, I’d forgotten how nasty this crash jelly tastes.’

‘Sounds like a personal problem to me,’ Shelley replies. ‘Shields still holding, but they’ll buckle soon enough. Even before we fired back, they increased power to their phasers. The only thing saving us now is the atmospheric heat screwing up their targeting sensors. My major concern is stopping at the bottom of the gravity well—before we hit ground, that is.’

‘Make the cloak look like we’re breaking up. We’ve got to gain some time once we’ve landed to sneak away.’

The ship lurches, then bucks wildly for a moment, causing the crash jelly to encase the occupants helplessly, like bugs in amber.

‘Another couple of shots like that,’ the computer says, ‘and I won’t have to fake a breakup.’

Through the forward port, Flynn watches the planet rush up to meet them sickeningly fast. In a matter of seconds, the ground goes from mottled green and brown to all brown to a landscape with myriad glacier-carved lakes to a vast looming close-up of one boulder-strewn section of earth.

Through the link, Flynn is helping Shelley as much as he can. He is triggered, his enhanced reflexes almost as fast as Shelley’s.

The ship suddenly begins a nauseating spin. Flynn vaguely hears moans from aft as the jelly hardens again.

‘Lost the stabilizer comp array for the starboard wing,’ Shelley says. ‘You aren’t fast enough to handle it; if I take over consciously, I won’t be able to do much of anything else.’

‘Do it; I’ll fly. I was dogfighting long before you were built.’

‘On it, hotshot. Give ’em hell.’

He feels control of the ship pass to him. They are still screaming hell-for-leather toward the ground, but now the spin has decreased to some erratic wobbles as Shelley focuses its attention on making the control surfaces behave.

At the last possible instant, Flynn flips the ship end for end. One big advantage of a spaceship over a conventional airplane is that with shielding, inertial dampening, and a forcefield-reinforced hull, it can play games with aerodynamics a pilot couldn’t begin to contemplate. And, of course, another big advantage is that enormous impulse engine.

Flynn brings the thrust up as high as he figures the hull and the inertial dampers can take, on a power trajectory that should, the gods of flight being willing, stop their descent, yet not rocket them back into the air. Even with the dampeners, it’s like being thrown against a wall. Consciousness fades, but doesn’t quite leave him.

And somewhere deep down, a little savage voice is urging him to power back out of the atmosphere and *go fight*.

The “landing” is not pleasant. Even though Flynn is wrapped immobile in a strong inertial damping webfield and virtually entombed in (and suffocated by) the hardened crash jelly, the impact still sends him finally reeling down into blackness.

❖

When he awakens, the first things he notices are the smell of smoke and the hiss of the automatic fire extinguishers. Never a good sign. His head throbs from the crash and endorphin rebound.

Ruddy emergency lights dimly illuminate the smoke-filled interior. Smoke claws at his throat, the kind of nasty smoke one can only get from electrical fires, rife with carcinogens. Most of the instruments are either on fire or unlit. A light on the shield generator console glows ominously red, undoubtedly due to an overload. Small repair automata scuttle everywhere, mindlessly fixing malfunctions by instinct.

He unplugs himself from the neural connection, since he can sense that it is dead. He is worried about Shelley, looking at all that darkness on the instrument panels. Yet the computer's redundant circuitry and self-repair mechanisms seem to have served it well. As he watches, status telltales show it coming back on line.

"Shelley," he says aloud, and is rewarded by a familiar chirping acknowledgement. Familiar, that is, from other ships' computers, not from his own. "External view away from planet's center, please, if you can." He wants to look up, but suspects, since a glance at the controls shows that the artificial gravity is still functioning, that "up" has relatively little meaning.

Slowly, a holographic image forms in front of him. It is a rather poor-quality image of a cloudy sky, the steel-gray overcast fuzzed and shimmered by heat haze. Around the image's borders, rock glows dull red.

"Status of cloaking device, engines, and computer, please."

"Cloaking device operational," a smooth uninflected voice says from the air beside his head. It sounds so little like Shelley that he has to fight an urge to look around to see who is talking. "But unreliable. Engines sufficient for atmospheric flight. Repairs are needed before this ship is spaceworthy again; automata are working on it now, uncertain how long it will take. Computer status is improving. Conscious functions are coming up now. Hot cognition and personality schemas rebuilding...rebuilding...rebuilt."

The voice becomes familiar once more. "Hey—I'm me again!" Shelley says. "And Flynn, allow me just to say, 'ouch'!"

Flynn snorts, relieved to have his electronic familiar back again. "Yeah, well, I don't feel so good myself. Just work on getting us out of this hole before someone comes to pick up the pieces, will you?"

"What happened?" Chekhov is struggling to sit up straighter in his chair, but seems to be groggy and in pain.

"Easy there," Flynn says, getting up and going back through the smoky cabin. He expertly feels Chekhov's arms and legs. "Nothing seems broken—except the medical scanner, I'm afraid. We've landed, if you want to call it that. I imagine that the defsat that fired at us knows that we are still alive, though." He glances around the cabin. "The others are coming around now, it looks like. Just sit still for a minute while I make sure you're okay, then I'll check them over."

"Quite a beating, eh, Pavel?" O'Connor asks, rubbing slime off her forehead.

All of them look like drowned rats from the remnants of the crash jelly. Montenegro is also coming to, sitting up and rubbing her head. She scowls when her fingers find a bump.

"Yes," Chekhov replies, "it certainly...ow!" He pushes Flynn away and gingerly touches his ribs through his scorched shirt.

"Sorry," Flynn says. "Looks like you've a burn there. Off with the shirt."

Hesitantly, Chekhov obeys. A nasty-looking combination burn and scrape covers an area the size of two hands just under the left nipple.

"I'll get the medkit," O'Connor says, turning aft.

“Don’t bother,” Flynn replies. “It was over there.” He points to a tangle of conduits and metal. “There was a hull breach, and a robot fixed it. We’re in one of the few Starfleet vessels with a medkit as an integral part of its hull.”

“We have to do something for Chekhov’s wound, it’ll get infected. And it must hurt like hell.”

“No, really, Jean,” Chekhov says, “it’s just a scratch.”

“Right,” Flynn says, “and that was a perfect landing. Just lie back. This is going to look a little weird, but bear with me and it’ll be okay.”

He stands for a moment as if in intense concentration, slowly flexing his hands, making fists, opening them. The others watch curiously. Montenegro is especially intent.

Withdrawn deep into himself, he deals with his body’s functioning at the most minute levels. He sees reactions and metabolic pathways via a imagery wetware installed and painstakingly learned via biofeedback many scores of years ago. Clusters of billiard balls bouncing erratically, occasionally sticking to other masses of balls, pebbly cell membrane surfaces pierced by receptors, ion channels like little pumps. He wills changes to be made in the sweat glands of his palms, corresponding antidotal changes to neuroreceptors in his skin.

He looks up, holding his hands away from his clothes. His palms have a sheen, as if sweaty. “Antiseptic,” he says, holding his left hand up. He holds up the right one. “Anesthetic.”

Chekhov shrinks back, but not quickly enough. Flynn wipes his hands, right then left, quickly over the injury.

“Ow! Hey, what do you think you’re...” Slowly, a look of amazement creeps over Chekhov’s face. “Captain, how did you do that? It doesn’t hurt any more!”

“Jean or Monty can probably explain it to you later. Right now, though, does anyone else have any cuts or burns?” They all shake their heads. “Okay,” he says, wiping his hands on his pants. “Then I’ve got to get back to the cockpit. Shelley should be ready to lift off by now.”

Montenegro is frowning.

“What’s the matter, Monty?” he says. “Ocht’s spies didn’t get that bit of my file? Wonder what else they missed, eh?” He nudges her and winks on his way past.

From above, the impact crater can be seen to stretch half a kilometer or more across the deserted tundra, a knife wound in the barren ground. Nothing moves. Only wisps of smoke and steam from the impact’s tremendous energy drift slowly up into the gray sky.

A dull red, glowing ship flickers briefly into visibility, upside down. It rights itself immediately and begins to lurch south, then flickers and fades from view as its cloaking device quickly repairs itself. A white beam lances from the sky, once, twice, again, but there is no explosion, no sign of the phaser hitting a shield. The defsat lapses into watchfulness. Atmospheric fighters are on the way.

Soon a net will be in place that not even a cloaked ship can evade.

# Chapter Thirteen

“Captain,” the face in the viewscreen says, looking impatient. “Must we tell you again? We cannot take chances with the scientists’ lives—they are our responsibility. There is a rebellion going on down here, for pity’s sake! We’re getting it under control, but it’s still dangerous. We cannot risk moving the scientists about until it’s quelled.”

Kirk has climbed the ladder of rank over the last half hour or so. Just before this woman was a full colonel in the defense forces. This woman wears no uniform, only a severely-cut garment that is the usual business suit on Athena. She glares at him as if he were a weed just out of reach of her clutching hands. At least, he imagines from the look on her face that her hands, out of sight below the cameras gaze, are clenched.

“Then tell us where they are being kept,” Kirk says, trying to keep his voice reasonable. He is sure he’s had this same conversation a dozen times today already, “We’ll beam them up here where it’s safe.”

“They’re staying in a shielded section of the city. Your transporters won’t work through our shields, and we don’t dare lower them until the rebels are in custody. It would be characteristic of them to try to kill the scientists to embarrass our government. You must be patient, Captain—or leave and come back when things are more settled. That would be best. It is not safe for you here, either. If the rebels should gain control of a defense satellite, we cannot be responsible for your safety.”

“We’ll take that under advisement, I assure you. Kirk out.”

The face dissolves, to be replaced by a real-time image of the forward view. The planet’s limb is to port, tans and greens from this angle. Ahead and slightly to starboard, a defense satellite is just visible.

“Tiresome, Jim?” McCoy walked up while Kirk was speaking.

“A tad, Bones, a tad. If you came up here from sickbay for some excitement, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed. Mr. Spock, any sign of our spy?”

“Negative, Captain. There has been some relatively heavy meteor activity for the past two days, which has now stopped. I assume that Flynn has been testing their defenses.”

“Captain,” Uhura says from the communications console, “a message just arrived from Starfleet. Two ships, the starship *Excelsior* and the troop transport *Indomitable*, are en route. Other ships are being sent as they can be freed up.”

Kirk nods. “Command structure?”

Uhura consults a screen in front of her. “You are to be in command of any ships sent on this mission.” He nods satisfaction. “Also, Captain, the message states that *Indomitable*’s Marines will be at your disposal.”

“Ground action?” McCoy asks. “A shipload of Marines against a whole planet? Lunacy.”

“I would tend to agree, Dr. McCoy,” Spock says, sounding faintly discomfited by the idea that he might agree with McCoy about anything. “Unless the Marines can be used with surgical accuracy...”

McCoy snorts derisively, cutting him off. “The only thing that’s going to be of ‘surgical accuracy’ around here is the work I’ll have to do to patch up all those Marines.”

“Sir,” Lieutenant Howe says from the helm station, “one of the defsats is firing on something.”

“What is it, Lieutenant?”

She frowns over her console for a few seconds, adjusting sensors. “I don’t know, sir. I can’t see anything.”

“Damn.” If they can’t see what is being shot at, it can only be one thing.

“Captain,” Spock says calmly, “I am tracking their target by its shields’ interaction with their phasers. The object is *Shelley*’s size. It is absorbing an enormous amount of energy from the satellite’s weapons.”

“Do something, Jim!” McCoy says. “Chekhov is on that ship.”

Kirk is torn. He does not want to jeopardize Flynn’s mission—or the *Enterprise*—but he also knows that Flynn’s ship can’t take the kind of punishment the defsats are capable of giving. But if he fires on the defsat, any hope of maintaining a semblance of impartiality for negotiating would be destroyed. And there would be no hope of sneaking another team onto the planet to continue Flynn’s mission, should he and his team be killed.

“Hell with it,” he says. He’ll just have to think of something later. He can’t let them die. “Mr. Wellcraft, lock phasers...”

“Captain!” Howe exclaims. “The target just plunged into the atmosphere. Looks like a power dive.”

“On screen, Lieutenant.”

A glowing dull-red dot skewered by a white phaser lance speeds toward the planet’s surface, unheeding of the atmospheric heat or the up-rushing surface. Kirk feels helpless, is helpless. Even if he orders an attack on the defsat, it is unlikely that he could save Flynn and the others. At best, *Enterprise* would be a minor distraction.

They are at the right angle to monitor the crash. They cannot see the ship, but the crash is spectacular, with glowing spumes of molten rock and probably pieces of a small, fatally-wounded ship. Some of the spray is vaporized as it rises into the phaser beam, then the phaser winks off, its work done.

Kirk thinks of Chekhov. Of O’Connor, so young, so promising. Of LaRue and the others. But Chekhov is...was...special. He and Kirk have served together for the better part of two decades. Kirk did not know Flynn and Montenegro well enough to be very saddened at their passing, but Chekhov’s death is a heavy blow. He hates the thought of having to tell Sulu, soon arriving in command of *Excelsior*, about his friend’s death.

“You know, Jim,” McCoy says, lightly laying a hand on his shoulder, “they might have survived...”

Kirk supposes it sounds weak even to him, since the doctor trails off uncertainly. He looks at Spock, who solemnly shakes his head slowly.

Kirk feels the rising anger, clean and sharp, burning away the sadness. Ocht will pay for this. Oh, yes, defsats or no, he will pay.

“Incoming communication from the planet, Captain,” Uhura says.

“No big surprise there,” grunts McCoy, stepping away from Kirk to get out of frame.

“On screen, Uhura.”

With surprise, Kirk recognizes the face glaring down from the holoscreen. He pushes aside for the moment the fact that he has lost a friend and crewmen. He must remain neutral-seeming and professional now. Revenge, like everything else, is secondary to his orders.

“Governor Ocht,” he says, “I’m honored.”

Ocht’s face is shaped like an egg, with just a fringe of hair around the sides. However, his face shows not the least sign of fragility. Heavy brows overshadow eyes dark like chips of coal. A strong jaw, jutting arrogantly, with a thin-lipped, cruel mouth above it. A long white scar stretches from the side of the left eye to the corner of his mouth. He seems to be fighting an internal struggle to stay calm.

“Kirk, this violation of our planetary sovereignty is the final straw,” he grates.

“But, your Excellency, I’m sure I don’t know what you’re...”

“Spare me your denials, Kirk,” Ocht snarls. “I know precisely what you’ve been up to and what your mission is. I demand that you relay this message to Starfleet and the Federation: Effective immediately, Athena formally withdraws from the Federation. You will leave orbit immediately.”

He motions as if to sign off, but Kirk halts him with a gesture. “One moment, Governor. This was not unexpected. I have orders to notify you that the Federation will *not* accept Athena’s secession. It is not at all clear that it is the will of the citizenry.”

Ocht looks like he is losing his battle to remain calm. There is something vaguely unsettling about watching him, but Kirk can’t quite put his finger on it. Ocht’s face works convulsively, but his voice is almost calm.

*Ego maniac*, Kirk decides. He has seen plenty of those.

“It most certainly is the will of my people, Kirk, though I am not about to justify myself to a ship’s captain. But even if it weren’t the will of the people, so what? We’re a sovereign planet, and I’m its ruler.”

“Governor, with all due respect, Athena is not a sovereign planet until the Federation says so. You can have whatever kind of petty dictatorship you want after secession is allowed, but not before. Until the Federation recognizes that you are no longer part of it, your participation or secession will be decided democratically, by planetary referendum, refereed by neutral parties. That was one of the agreements made when your planet applied for membership in the Federation.”

“That agreement no longer stands, Kirk,” Ocht snaps. “By my order, we are no longer part of your Federation. I warn you—if you do not leave our solar system immediately, we will fire on you as is our right as an independent government to protect the space it governs. The Federa-

tion's only recourse will be through their diplomats, which won't do you an iota of good. Your component atoms will have long since said farewell to one another."

Kirk has casually moved during this to a position behind the navigation console. He places a hand on Lieutenant Wellscraft's shoulder and squeezes. She swallows hard, but busies herself with the fire controls.

*Let's see how the bully likes being threatened himself,* Kirk thinks.

"If the issue were that simple, Governor," he says, an edge in his voice, "I would certainly bow to your authority and let the Federation diplomatic corps sort it out. However, you have many thousands of Federation citizens—students, teachers, and workers—on your planet. Consequently, the Federation has authorized me *a priori* to act as ambassador extraordinary to your planet, even while you remain part of the Federation in our view. This ship is hereby a diplomatic vessel, immune from hostilities under galactic accords. We will remain here until the last Federation citizen is delivered to us."

Ocht rises from his chair, his face red. A vein throbs at his throat. He is obviously losing his battle to remain in control. "Why you insignificant little soldier-boy! I'll have you swatted from the sky!"

"Before you do that, Governor, consider two things. Though your enhanced weapons could undoubtedly destroy my ship, we are now targeting several of your major industrial and governmental sites—where you sit now, for example—with phasers and photon torpedoes. Your defsats would stop most of the torpedoes, perhaps, but some will connect. I'm not sure that's a chance you would like to take."

"You wouldn't dare."

"Don't count on it Governor. What would we have to lose?"

Ocht still glares, but slowly sits back down. "And the second thing?"

"Other Federation starships are already on their way."

"Stay then, damn you! You'll want to run soon enough anyway. You'll regret this, Kirk, I promise you!"

A view of the planet replaces Ocht's florid face. From this perspective, the green and dun world softly spinning below looks so peaceful.

# Chapter Fourteen

The ship has made a highly-circuitous journey down from the north polar area to the temperate regions, constantly avoiding the scanning eyes of the defense satellites. Twice they were fired upon by a defsat when the cloaking device acted up. Three times they had to strain *Shelley*'s damaged hull in high-speed maneuvers to outrun atmospheric fighters that had gotten close enough to detect them using magnetometers or other sensors mercifully not usable from orbit.

Several hundred kilometers ago, *Shelley* dropped a small cloaked drone designed to look to the defsats like *Shelley*. When the mother ship was far enough away, the drone's cloak flickered. It was immediately fired upon and exploded convincingly. Flynn hoped that that convinced the watchers that *Shelley*'s over-taxed shields finally could take no more.

That's what Flynn hopes, anyway. It's the best they can do, in any case.

Now, *Shelley* settles slowly toward the ocean a few kilometers off the coast of University City. Very gingerly, careful not to allow a splash or cause turbulence that might renew suspicions from above, the computer lets the ship sink into the waves.

"Why in the water, Captain?" LaRue asks. Flynn finds it amusing that all of the modern-day sailors from *Enterprise* are nervous of the sea. At least Monty looks unconcerned, regardless of what she might be feeling.

"Sooner or later the Athenian defsats will be able to penetrate our cloaking device's cover, LaRue. Under a kilometer of water, we'll be much more invisible from orbit—though they could still find us, given enough time, determination, and luck."

"Might as well relax. It'll take a while to get to the bottom."

Chekhov's eyes dart to the view port, which now shows nothing but black water. "All that pressure..." he says, almost to himself.

"Don't worry, Chekhov," Flynn reassures him. "*Shelley* is a very special craft. She's built for this sort of thing."

The hull creaks, slow and deep.

"I wish," the computer says, "that I felt half as confident as you sound."

❖

"Flynn."

He had dozed off in the cockpit chair. Now he is instantly awake, almost triggered, before he catches himself.

*More edgy than I thought*, he thinks ruefully.

"What is it, *Shelley*?"

"We're nearing the bottom. I'm using the control surfaces to spiral us down, but I don't have any thrusters left on my belly to slow us. There's going to be a slight bump. Just thought I'd warn you."

The ship lurches suddenly and violently to port, nearly tossing him from the chair. A grinding noise fills the cabin, then the ship pitches over to starboard. Motion stops.

“A ‘slight bump,’ Shelley?” Flynn mutters as a babble of concern rises behind him from the others.

“What now?” O’Connor asks when everyone is again relatively calm. “How do we get from here to shore? Transporters?”

“Too risky, even if the escape transporters would get us that far through all this water, and I’m not too certain of that. I’m pretty sure the defstsats would detect them. At best, they’d know where *Shelley* is, and at worst, they’d scramble the beam.” No one looks like they think that would be a pleasant prospect. “We’ll use them only in an emergency to get back here. *Shelley* has some two-person sea sleds, little things like torpedoes. We’ll go ashore in those.”

“There’s a passive sonar net along the coast,” Montenegro says. “We’ll trigger them if we go too near with the sleds.”

“I figured as much. The sleds are designed to sound like whatever we want them to. We’ll start off mimicking the local equivalent of whales. But just to be safe... Do you know where the sonar receivers are?”

“Yes. I was part of the security team for this area for a while once. Unless they’ve been moved, I can lead us to a safe distance from them. Then I think you and I should swim in and disable them.”

“Can you remember anything about their design? Maybe Shelley can whip up something that’ll feed them a fake signal. Less conspicuous than disabling them.”

“Sorry. I was security, not technical.”

“Oh, well.”

Half an hour later, a hatch slides open on the ship’s stern and three enclosed sleds make their way out of the ship. Montenegro is in the lead in a sled by herself, followed by one piloted by Chekhov, with LaRue as passenger. In the rear are Flynn and O’Connor.

Flynn thought hard about the assignment of the sleds. He still does not completely trust Montenegro. He considered riding with her, but to be safe, he would have had to be triggered the entire time. Triggered augments did not always make the wisest, calmest decisions. And he couldn’t really put any of the others in the sled with her. If she was going to betray them, she would just kill anyone with her out of hand. So he settled for the current arrangement. He is now free to watch her without being triggered, yet he will have time to react to any odd actions on her part.

Montenegro is no fool. She accepted the arrangement with a sardonic, knowing smirk.

And he is acutely aware of his motivation for putting Jean in the sled with him, despite the risk from her still-unknown motives. Riding with him, she is the safest one of the crew apart from Monty herself.

For the first few minutes, they can see a ways through the water, their floodlights seeming to bore yellow-green cones in the ocean ahead of them. After a while, though, the particle-rich water begins to scatter the floodlights, until finally the other two sleds are dim, almost subliminal green glows ahead.

The sleds are not the most comfortable modes of transportation ever invented. For one thing, they are all suited up, with air tanks on their backs, even though at this depth, this wouldn't do them much good if the hulls failed; death would be instantaneous. For another thing, they are piloting the things practically lying on their backs, reminding of Flynn of the one time he tried sledding down a snow-covered hill on a luge. He had never felt less in control. Now, his flippered feet are clumsy on the pitch and yaw controls, and his hand has little room to move the throttle in the crevice between the seat and the starboard hull. It is impossible to get comfortable. Every position Flynn shifts into, something—his tanks, a hose, his knife, his phaser—jabs into him or seems to grind on bone.

O'Connor, now that action of a sort is finally upon them, is cool and professional, very much the security officer. She lies behind Flynn, out of direct sight, though he can see her reflection by the glow of the instruments in the plastic bubble overhead. She stares past his shoulder out into the water, a look of intelligent alertness on her face.

Flynn tried repeatedly while they were waiting in orbit to find out why she volunteered to go on a mission with a "monster," but to no avail. She dodged the question the first few times he asked, but finally got fed up.

"Look," she said, "I have my reasons. I'm a good officer; you should be glad to have me along. Now how about leaving me alone?"

So he did. But he can hazard several ideas about what her reasons might be, none good for him. No doubt, she would not jeopardize the mission—she *is* too good an officer to do that. But there are times in any mission, clean-up times, escape times, when no one is paying particular attention to within-group interactions. Times like those, if you really hate a team member, it is easy to stick a knife in them and blame the enemy.

Studying her pretty face in the reflection, he admires again the strength and determination he sees beneath her apparently frail beauty. Would that strength be the death of him?

*Maybe it really doesn't matter*, he thinks, wresting his gaze off her reflection.

If anyone alive has a legitimate reason to kill him, isn't it her? He is beyond judgment by law, at least by any law his superiors feel like laying aside for him. But doesn't her claim on him almost have the force of law? And what's that fleeting thought, slinking past his consciousness and then retreating into the depths of his mind—wasn't it something like a welcome to an end to life, a life that has stretched out too long and that has been filled with too much violence and monstrosity?

Right now, though, he is more concerned with Montenegro than O'Connor. They are at her mercy now. If she intends to betray them to her creators, there will be no better time than as they approach the sonar ring.

Suddenly, the lights on the two sleds ahead get closer. He throttles back, then allows the sled to sink the meter or so to the bottom. They are in shallow water now. From here, once pressure is equalized, even the normals could easily swim to the surface without risking the bends, if they go slowly.

After getting a thumbs-up sign from O'Connor, he begins bringing up the internal pressure. It takes a few minutes, made uncomfortable both by the constant need to equalize the pressure in his ears as well as by the ice-cold water seeping in. He is glad when the cabin, and his wetsuit, fills.

Montenegro is patiently hanging in the water by her sled, waiting for them. Motioning the others to say put, the two augments swim swiftly toward shore and quickly vanish in the gloom just beyond the glow of the sleds' feeble lights.

The three *Enterprise* crewmen float close to one another, huddling near enough that they can see each others' faces. They exchange helpless looks. Chekhov's shrug is eloquent. They are as alone now as any of them can remember, even more vulnerable than in space. At least space is empty, or rather contains mainly known dangers. Here, in hostile territory in an unknown sea with who knows what lurking beyond their ring of light, possibly *drawn* by their ring of light... And it is doubtful that any of them could even find *Shelley* again.

With no communication needed, they form a triangle, each of them facing outward.

Even in their well-disciplined minds, irrational (and some rational) fears arise. Will Flynn and Montenegro incapacitate the sonar, or will they be captured, leaving the three of them here to freeze to death or run out of air? Or maybe they won't come back at all—maybe the three of them were just along in case they were needed, and the augments have decided that they aren't, after all. Or maybe that long dark shape they just glimpsed swimming past will come back and have them for a meal—and their phasers, never meant for undersea work anyway, are securely tucked away in their waterproof packs.

The minutes drag past.



Finally and suddenly, there are two others among them. After a brief moment of panic, they recognize Flynn and Montenegro, who have swum back without their own lights to home in on the sleds. Flynn raises his hand in an "okay" sign and motions them back to the sleds.

They don't bother pumping out the sleds for the run to shore. Silently, and now without lights, they slide through the water. The bottom speeds past, first rocks covered with encrusting sea life and silt, then white sand, speckled here and there with beds of some sort of seaweed. They pass over a hexagonal structure that shows signs of recently having been brushed free of debris—the sabotaged sonar station.

When the sleds finally are allowed to come to rest on the bottom, they extinguish the lights, grab their packs, and swim for shore.

Just beyond the surf zone, they stop and break the surface to look around. The surf is heavy, whipped into whitecaps well offshore by a strong breeze. The night is black, cloudy. The only light is from a dull glow near the horizon where clouds cover a moon and from a brighter glow over the shoreward horizon toward University City.

Flynn pushes himself as far out of the water as he can with his fins and scans the shore with infrared binoculars, then checks a gadget that can detect tricorders and other sensors. Ocht will have taken precautions. Secretly, he doubts that he was fooled by the fake explosion, and Ocht

knows as well as he does that University City is the likely target of any invasion attempt by the Federation.

No one. At least, no one visible.

He leads the others ashore. They wade out behind a rusted-out hulk that might have been a large boat at one time. It is lying on its side now, a forlorn derelict. Its flat bottom glows blood red in the light of one of the moons that has now peeked out from the clouds. It reverberates in sympathy with the crashing waves.

They begin to peel off their wetsuits to change into street clothes, the air raising goosebumps on their bare skin. Flynn finishes first and edges around the side of the boat to again scan for sentries.

Behind him, someone gets a leg caught in a wetsuit and trips into the hull. A dull gong-like sound rings out across the sand, audible even over the boom of the surf.

A voice from in-shore calls out, “Who’s there? Come out from behind that boat—this is the Security Force.”

Flynn curses silently and triggers. Even before the changes are complete, he sees something strange out of the corner of his eye: clothing flung in such a way to land where it is out of view of the sentry.

Surprised, Flynn looks around to see O’Connor walking quickly out diagonally from the hull’s shelter. She is completely naked, and motions him to stay where he is. He is torn—if he doesn’t do something, she’ll be captured, but if he grabs her, the security officers will shoot them both. And the metal of the hull will be no refuge from whatever weapons the soldiers have.

“Don’t shoot!” O’Connor cries, doing a good job of sounding frightened. “I just came down here to swim!”

A bright light shines down the beach, spearing her, making her look like some improbable version of Venus’ birth. She does a plausibly half-hearted attempt to cover herself, leaving more exposed than covered. Only silence comes from the direction of the guards. With an effort, Flynn rips his eyes from O’Connor and eases back around the side of the hull to the others.

“What the hell does she think she’s doing...?” Montenegro hisses, but shuts up at Flynn’s impatient gesture.

“Are you triggered?” he whispers. She grins in reply. “Okay, but do nothing.”

He stares at her until she finally nods. He motions for them to gather their gear and wait.

“Are you alone?” the voice shouts. He sounds shaken. Whatever he was expecting, a beautiful nude woman was probably not it.

“Yes,” she replies, raising her hands. “I was just swimming.”

“You aren’t supposed to be out here. It’s after curfew.”

“I *would’ve* been back by curfew, but I went to sleep, and when I woke up, it was dark. Now I’m cold and I can’t find my clothes *anywhere*. Can you help me? I don’t have a light.”

The light bounces as the man walks forward, but keeps her pinned. Even from the other side of the boat, Flynn can see the goosebumps on her skin. It is cold, at least that part of her story is

true. If the guard notices her wet hair, though, they'll be in trouble; that doesn't fit with a few hours of sleep.

He checks again for sensors, finds none, and trains his phaser on a point just behind the flashlight on the beach. The guard is surely not alone, but maybe his disintegration would startle the other guards enough for him to grab Jean and for them to make a break for the ocean.

Flynn and the others flatten against the hull just in time as the guard swings his light their way, then quickly back to O'Connor. Flynn again takes aim.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't be out here," the guard repeats, his eyes devouring O'Connor. He is fighting a losing battle to keep his attention on her face. His eyes continue to be drawn down to her breasts, across her stomach and below, then they rebound guiltily back upwards.

"I know, but can you help me find my clothes? You won't report me, will you?" She has just the right note of anxiety in her voice; Flynn doubts that it is hard to fake. "I'll get in such trouble at school if you do!"

"I *should* report you," the guard says, "but your story sounds plausible, and you have an honest, uh, face. What's that over there?" He motions with the light.

"My clothes!" she shouts. "Oh, thank you!" She runs to them and shakes out the sand.

"You know," the guard says, holding the light on her and watching her dress, "you should be careful swimming by yourself. Like that. I mean, you should wear something. I keep my hands off the ladies, but there's some guards that don't, if you know what I mean."

She looks properly chastised, then smiles and takes his arm. "Well, I'm glad you were the one that found me, then. Can you walk me off the beach? I *am* kind of scared, to tell you the truth."

❖

She waves good-bye to the guard, after giving him a fake name for him to call sometime, then walks off down the deserted highway toward the city. A hundred meters later, she is silently joined by Flynn and the others.

"That was a hell of a risk," Flynn says harshly. "Why? I could've easily taken him out. It was stupid."

"Yeah," she says angrily. "You'd have killed him, right? Well, he's not done anything to you, he's not Ocht, he's not important in the scheme of things, he's just a bit player. He doesn't deserve to die just for keeping people from invading his city. And what if you'd killed him and there'd been several of them? How many alert, fully-armed guards could you and Monty take out before they killed us all? You immune to phasers, big shot? The way I figured it, my way stood a good chance of preventing anyone from getting killed. If there were several of them, at least I could provide a diversion for you two to get at the others."

"And what if it had been someone not interested in women instead of that guy? What then?"

"You're supposed to know all about Athena." Her voice drips scorn. "This planet has a strong nudity taboo—that much is in the tourist information, for heaven's sake! No matter who it was, the shock value would have put them off their guard, at least momentarily. And it worked, dammit, though I'm sure you and Monty are pissed because there was no excuse for a killing frenzy!"

He is not put off by her anger; he rather enjoys it, actually. He grins savagely.

“I’m sure I’ll agree with you when I detrigger and think like a normal again—which I don’t intend to do until we’re safe for the night.”

He sees the realization on her face. She is again talking to the monster of her childhood. She puts a little more distance between them.

“But what would you have done,” he persists, “if he’d been suspicious, or if he had tried to rape you?”

“I’m a security officer, damn you, not some little kid you have to look after. You don’t have to be an augment to incapacitate or kill an armed man if the motivation is right—you just have to be willing.” She glares at him, then resumes marching down the road.

Flynn chuckles, enjoying the implied threat, and lopes off the road to melt into the shadows. Montenegro, also triggered now, is jogging along the other side of the road, a feral grin on her face.

The three *Enterprise* officers, flanked by two of the most dangerous people on the planet, walk safely down the edge of the highway and into the outskirts of the city.

# Chapter Fifteen

“Mr. Scott,” Spock says, turning to the chief engineer, “I believe I have found a useful energy signature and pattern in the defense satellites’ phaser fire.”

The two of them are standing at Spock’s computer station. They have been there for hours, poring over the data gained from watching the defsat attacking Flynn’s ship. Kirk, impatient in his command chair some distance away, could just hear the suggestions and comments of the scientist and engineer to one another. Though he is far from technically illiterate, most of it might as well have been in another language. Since this is the first intelligible thing he has heard, he takes it as an excuse to leave his chair and kibitz.

“Progress, gentlemen?” he inquires.

“Aye, Captain,” Scott says, “I think our Mr. Spock has found what we need. It’ll nae be much help, maybe, but it’ll be a far sight better than nothing.”

“What exactly have you found?”

“I have,” says Spock as he turns to face Kirk, “examined the phaser fire of the defensive satellites as they fired on *Shelley*. It appears that one of the new features of Athenian phasers is the ability to rapidly shift the maximum output frequency in a pseudorandom fashion. Unless shields are able to compensate, there is a high probability that their maximum protective point will be other than the frequency at which the phaser is firing.”

“But that’s old technology, Spock, isn’t it? I mean, our phasers do that, right?”

“Correct, Captain...”

“But the beauty of theirs, Captain,” Scott breaks in, “is how fast the frequency can be shifted. With our phasers, the change is slow enough that the enemy shields have time to compensate before significant damage is done. These, though, they switch so fast that before the shield generator adjusts, the phaser has moved on to another frequency.”

“But you’ve found something?”

“Yes, Captain,” Spock says. “As I suspected, the phaser frequency modulator operates on a pseudorandom rather than truly random basis. Real random numbers are quite difficult to produce. Pseudorandom numbers are easier, but have a pattern, though that pattern may be extremely difficult to find. I have found the pattern inherent in the Athenian defense satellites’ phasers.”

Kirk looks at Scott. “So you can counter them?”

“Oh, aye, Captain—we can predict when and to what frequency the phaser will switch next, and our shield generator can be there waiting for them!”

“Let’s do it, then, Scotty, let’s do it. The Athenian transporters on that defsat are our only ticket to the surface, if we can get aboard without getting ourselves killed.”

“And if,” McCoy interjects, “they don’t scramble their own transporters as soon as you’re aboard.”

“Always the optimist, eh, Bones?”

“I should point out,” says Spock gravely, “that the ability to rapidly shift frequency is only one aspect of how these phasers are more advanced than ours. Our shields may still not be able to survive them for long.”

“I seem to be blessed with optimists today,” Kirk says, shaking his head.



Early in the planetary defenses’ search for *Shelley*, the *Enterprise* was ordered out to geosync where one of the defsts could keep an eye on her. Now, the ship drifts almost imperceptibly closer to Defsat 3, a gigantic spindle floating point-on to the planet below.

The lights of viewports can be seen as pinpricks of brilliance against a dark, almost invisible hull, like diamonds on black velvet. At several locations around the satellite’s distended middle, ominous circular plates glow like angry red eyes, revealing the presence of phaser generators. Between these, open maws of photon torpedo tubes gape. Above and below are huge doors leading to the bays of the intrasystem fighter craft, small deadly ships meant to harass intruders while their mother disposes of them.

Athenian defense and orbital control have been hailing *Enterprise* for fifteen minutes. Uhura has been answering with recorded messages that say the ship is having computer problems at the moment and cannot communicate. Undoubtedly, the commander of the defsat knows that this is a lie. The ship’s sensors indicate that the defsat is at a heightened defense posture, not ready to attack just yet, but almost. Kirk is surprised that Ocht has not ordered them shot before now.

The final straw comes when *Enterprise* drifts within ten kilometers of the defsat. The defsat opens fire. But its phasers, which ought to be carving *Enterprise*’s hull, play about her shields instead.

Kirk hopes that the pompous Lt. Wainwright is even now worrying about new technology from Newton.

“The shield modifications are working,” Spock announces. “However, shields are losing power rapidly. Down to ninety percent on forward shields.”

“Mister Wellscraft,” Kirk says to the woman at the navigation/fire control console, “target the satellite’s phasers, torpedo tubes, and shield generator with our phasers and photon torpedoes. Fire at will.”

Brilliant blue beams leap from the ship’s primary hull, lancing out to connect with the defsat’s shields. At the same time, torpedoes leap from their tubes. It is essentially a battle of shield attrition. No obvious physical damage accrues to either party, just a horrendous amount of energy dissipating itself against opposing shields.

Kirk hopes that the portion of the planet below the battle isn’t getting too much of a dose of gamma rays from the encounter, but that can’t be helped now. He anxiously listens to the numbers tracking his ship’s shield’s failure. They are down to thirty percent, and still the defsat’s shields seem firm.

“Mister Howe,” he says, “lay in a course up and out of the ecliptic, warp two, on my command.”

“Aye, sir,” she says, hastily complying. She is obviously relieved that Kirk is not going to let them be skewered by the satellite’s phasers.

“Mr. Spock,” he says, “the defsat has the upper hand with respect to armament, I’m afraid. But we have the advantage of being mobile. What would happen if we locked on with a tractor beam and tried to pull the satellite out of orbit—while still firing on it?”

“Unknown, Captain,” he says, raising an eyebrow as if at an interesting logic puzzle. “But it would be interesting to find out.”

“Agreed. Wellscraft, lock a tractor beam on the satellite. Howe, full impulse power, directly away from the planet.”

*Enterprise* leaps backwards away from the defsat, though still tracked by its phasers, then comes up short like a dog on a leash. A deep groan comes from somewhere in *Enterprise*’s bowels, and Kirk glances to his left just long enough to see Scotty glare at him.

The defsat, however, is not unmoved. It twists on its axis and actually begins to move into a higher orbit. Lights flicker and go out as power is diverted to maintaining station.

Too late, it attempts to launch intrasystem fighter craft, but they cannot get through the blazing interface of phasers and shields. The two or three that do manage it fire ineffectually at *Enterprise*’s sides instead of concentrating on her buckling forward shields.

“Forward shields folding, Captain,” Wellscraft cries.

“Hard to starboard! Bring our port shields between us, but keep up the phaser and photon torpedo fire.”

“Incoming!” yells Howe, as a torpedo is launched from the defsat. It arches around the ship, following as she turns her damaged shields away from the battle. The torpedo speeds toward them. The ship’s fire control computer targets the torpedo, but it is just too small and fast. Close in defensive phaser beams lance all around it without hitting it.

“All hands,” barks Kirk, punching a button on his command chair, “brace yourselves—incoming torpedo!”

The ship’s shields are only its first, best line of defense. Its hull is also wrapped in tightly-woven fields that maintain its integrity, giving the hull a strength far above that of the materials it is made from. Other fields serve to damp energy fluxes, and superconducting fibers in the hull can almost instantaneously spread thermal and electrical energy over the entire surface of the ship and radiate it to space. If it were not for these close-in defenses, a photon torpedo, or even a much weaker thermonuclear-tipped missile, would vaporize the ship.

As it is, when the torpedo slams into the primary hull and explodes, it rips a great gaping hole in the forward edge. Air and pieces of the ship puff out into the void. Kirk’s heart sinks as he sees bodies in the debris cloud.

“Damn! Damage report,” he shouts.

“Several decks report hull breach, Captain,” Spock says, sounding not quite as calm as usual. “Some fatalities, many casualties. No major non-local functional or structural damage.”

“Come on, come on,” Kirk mutters, watching the defsat in the viewscreen. *Enterprise*’s phasers continue to play harmlessly off the shields. Another torpedo is launched, but is obliterated by fire control as soon as it passes through the satellite’s shields.

Suddenly, the ship’s phasers leap toward the defsat from where they had been stopped by its shields. Simultaneously, the ship begins dragging the defsat out of orbit. The phasers slash great rips in the station’s hull, and a photon torpedo connects, decimating a fighter craft hanger and a goodly stretch of the surrounding hull.

“Cease fire!” Kirk barks. “All right, Mr. Howe, drop the tractor beam, but take us in a quick circuit of the station. Mr. Wellscraft, as she does that, target the phaser and torpedo emplacements and the fighter craft bays only. Phasers, just enough to irreparably damage them. Begin—and disable those three fighters, while you’re at it.”

Within a few minutes, the once deadly defsat is declawed.

“Intrasytem fighters coming from the surface and from other defsats, Captain,” Spock says. “ETA fifteen minutes.”

“Scotty,” Kirk says, “Can you extend our shields out far enough to give the defsat some protection when those fighters get here?”

“Aye, sir, that I can—if you’re sure that beastie’s nae longer in a fighting spirit, and if ye can sidle the ship up real close to her. But spreading the shields out like that will make ’em weaker all around.”

“Good enough.”

*Enterprise* moves her wounded nose close to the defsat. Her port, starboard, ventral, and dorsal shields extend out in an invisible oval to encompass much of the defsat.



“Now that you have the blasted thing,” McCoy asks, “what are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to salvage what is left of the mission. I have to assume that Flynn is dead, so it’s my mission now. I scanned his files while Scotty and Spock were finding a way to attack our silent friend out there. I need to get down to the surface, find the scientists and engineers, and destroy the projects.”

“You’re as nuts as Flynn was!” McCoy glares at him. “What is it with you, Jim—trying to recapture your youth with some damn-fool cowboy stunt? James T. Kirk against the galaxy, one last time? For God’s sake, stay here, let the other spies and Marines do it. We’re too old for this nonsense!”

“Finished?” Kirk asks, nettled. “Good. I have to go, because it’s now my mission.”

He gestures with both arms, taking in the whole cosmos. “And if you look around you, you’ll see that there are no other spies, no Marines, no one...only us. By the time the other ships get here, especially now that we’ve attacked the defsat, our friend Governor Ocht will have gathered enough force together to keep all of us off-planet—it’ll take a full-scale invasion to get the scientists out. Our only chance to get down there is to use the transporters on the defsat. If Ocht’s people haven’t deactivated them.”

“I still say it’s crazy!”

Kirk looks around the bridge. The senior officers are watching openly, the juniors are keeping their eyes studiously on their own tasks.

*Are they all thinking what McCoy is saying?* he wonders.

Come to that, wasn't McCoy's analysis uncomfortably accurate, at least with respect to part of his motivation? But still... What else could he do?

"So," he says, "I guess this means you won't be coming along?"

McCoy looks offended.

"Of course I'm coming along, dammit! Just because it's crazy, doesn't mean I'm not going. Somebody has to keep you out of trouble."

"Besides," he gestures at the viewscreen, where the crippled defsat hangs surrounded by debris, "there may still be someone alive over there that needs a doctor."

Kirk nods, suppressing a grin. He looks at Spock. "And you, Mr. Spock? Care to join the aging damn-fool cowboy?"

Spock raises one eyebrow and inclines his head. "I believe, Captain, that it is customary for a cowboy to have not only a dilapidated doctor but also a sidekick. I shall be honored."

"Dilapidated...?" says McCoy.

"Security," Kirk says to the intercom, "I need three guards in transporter room three immediately for a boarding party. Fully body armor, assault weapons. Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, come with me. Mr. Scott, you have the conn, Uhura, you'll second him. If you can no longer handle the intrasystem fighters, warp out of here and rendezvous with *Excelsior* and *Indomitable*. Clear?"

"Aye, sir." Scott moves to take the command chair.

When the turbolift swishes shut, whisking Kirk and his two friends away, he turns to Uhura.

"Well, lassie, think we can handle these insects that'll soon be a-pesterin' us?"

"I'm sure we can, Scotty," she replies, smiling. "If we just use a big enough fly swatter."



The interior of the defsat is chaotic. Even in the best of times, it would have been neither luxurious nor attractive. Now, red emergency lights glare harshly in the smoky corridor in which the boarding party materializes, phasers drawn and body armor in place. Twisted pipes from an explosion tangle together like high-tech vines. Fires burn in several places down the corridor, adding to the ghastly glow.

Spock looks at the tricorder in his armored hand and motions down the corridor. "The control center is this way, Captain."

They start off, heavy boots making dull klunking sounds on the deck. McCoy, after much cajoling, agreed to body armor—after Spock pointed out that it would be highly illogical to beam over to a defeated military satellite and expect them to be friendly.

Twice along the way, they see bodies. Each time, McCoy bends over them, medical scanner in hand, but in both cases shakes his head. Each time, Kirk feels a sharp stab of guilt.

Damage to the exterior of the station was relatively minor, but in here, it is chaos. Apparently the satellite's reactors failed in a rather spectacular way. This is confirmed when they see a gaping hole at one point along the corridor where pieces of one of the reactors had torn through

the plasteel bulkheads like they were paper. Worse, Spock detected traces of poisonous gases that had apparently been released during the explosions. The atmospheric systems had removed it by the time the party from *Enterprise* arrived—luckily—but not soon enough to save the crew.

The control room is so damaged that at first they do not recognize it for what it is. Several officers lay slumped over their controls. As McCoy checks for survivors, Spock moves to interrogate the defsat's computer.

“They were in the process of arming autodestruct, Captain,” he says, “but did not have a chance to finish.” He continues working at the console for a moment, then looks up with apparent satisfaction. “Orbit-to-ground transporter located, Captain. It appears to be still functional.”

Kirk looks at McCoy, who shakes his head. There is nothing he can do for any of the bridge crew. “Let’s go, then, before we’re met on the ground by an army.”

They haven’t seen too many bodies, and for that, he is tremendously grateful. Either the defsat is mostly automated, or else it was partially evacuated during the ~~battle~~. [ Roy Turner, 6/30/15, 10:09 PM - wouldn’t ground transporters have been immediately disabled? Maybe they can’t be? And if the people were being evacuated via the transporters, wouldn’t the planetary transporter station have known about that — the satellite’s in geosync, after all... ]

He hopes it is the former. If the latter, then, well, the ground station will have been warned and will be waiting for them.

On the way, Kirk’s communicator chirps.

“Kirk here,” he says, flipping it open.

“Captain,” Scott’s voice says, sounding tinny. “Two ships, a Klingon bird of prey and a Romulan warbird, have just decloaked in orbit nearby. The intrasystem fighters are arriving now, too.”

“Damn! Okay, beam our guards back, then cut and run, Mr. Scott, and that’s an order. We’re heading to the transporter room here. You can’t hold out against that kind of firepower. Go rendezvous with the others. We’ll beam down to the planet and try to locate the engineers and scientists. The fewer of us involved, the better.”

“We canna leave you there, Captain, we...”

“That’s an *order*, Mr. Scott,” he repeats firmly. “Go!”

“Aye, sir,” he says, sounding none too happy.

In seconds, the guards are gone.

“Jim,” McCoy asks as Spock is bent over the controls in the transporter room, “how do you know that they don’t have a mechanism to scramble their own transporters?”

“I don’t. But if you were a macho dictator like Ocht, convinced your defsats were invincible, would you bother to guard against the impossible, someone taking them over?”

“Betting on madman’s reasoning is a big risk, Jim.”

“Hey, you have anything better to do today?”



The Romulan vessel, huge and menacing, all curves and vaguely hawk-shaped, has left its parking orbit and moves toward where *Enterprise* and the defsat lie in their embrace. *Enterprise* withdraws the protection of her shields, backs off from the crippled defsat and vanishes into warp. A green disrupter beam lances out from the warbird, hitting the defenseless satellite dead on. Nothing happens for a moment, then the defsat explodes in silent pyrotechnic splendor.

The Klingon ship, smaller and more angular, swoops through the debris cloud, red-orange phasers flicking here and there, cleaning up anything human-sized or bigger that was left.

That done, both ships move off in different directions. Their outlines waver, as if seen underwater after someone has dragged hand across the surface, then they are gone.

## Chapter Sixteen

The search for the student underground cells has not gone well. They would not have bothered with them at all, but it rapidly became apparent to Flynn that Ocht has eliminated or driven to ground every one of the Starfleet operatives in University City, if not on the whole planet.

They split up well outside of town. Chekhov and Monty continued on into town, just two tourists from somewhere half a continent away, he a salesman and she an executive in a small hovercar company. They checked into the Hotel Athenian—a stolid pile of stone that had pretensions of grandeur and grace. Or perhaps it had *had* grandeur and grace at some point well back in its history, even though it now was faded and dowdy. The names given were Piotr Sakarov and Monty Noir.

When Flynn had complained that Monty's pseudonym was too close to her real name, she had pointed out that her *real* name wasn't her real name.

The room was bugged. They didn't know that, but that had to be their default assumption. So they acted their parts, even in private. The first night in the room's bed was uncomfortable in the extreme for Chekhov. It wasn't that he was in bed with an attractive woman—she had gone through handsome in her changes and was now close to beautiful—who was essentially a stranger. It was just that he kept remembering *what* she was.

When she got in bed and turned over to give him a very old-married-couple-like good-night kiss, it was all he could do to return it with a feeble "Good night, dear." She smirked; she had him pegged, and he could feel himself blush.

They spent the following day seeing what sights there were to see in the city, touring the university, and generally acting their parts. If they aroused anyone's suspicions, it was not apparent.

Flynn and the other two spent that night sharing a cold, fireless camp. They were in farm country, just outside the city. The clouds had fled, and the little moon that was now diving toward the horizon gave faint light to gentle rolling fields, black-green in the near-darkness. Hedgerows two meters wide made a crazy quilt of the fields. A thin fog hugged the ground, meandering slowly as it was pushed by occasional little breaths of air. To the north, was University City's sullen glow.

The camp was at the intersection of two hedgerows. Instead of the brambles and tall grass that was in the rows, here was a little copse of Terran-adapted trees, birches and maples. They didn't dare start a fire or make a light. Flynn hoped the trees' leaves would break up their heat signature for any overhead watchers, or that they would be taken for vagrants.

Late that night, O'Connor awoke in the chill damp air to find the sleeping bag to her right empty. Concerned, she looked to her left, only to see LaRue, sitting up and looking back at her thoughtfully.

"You're awake," she said. "Where's Flynn?"

"Dunno," he replied. "I heard him unzip his bag, but by the time I turned over, he was gone."

“He’ll be back,” she said.

“Yeah, sure.” He didn’t sound that convinced.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“Could be I just think you’re one good-looking woman.”

She sniffed. “Yeah? You and I both know you’re gay.”

He grinned. “Got me there. I didn’t think you knew me that well.”

“Johi.”

“Oh. Damned bisexual,” he said, not without affection. He sobered quickly. “What I’m trying to figure out is why *you’re* here at all. You must hate that bastard.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Well,” he continued, defensive, “he beat the hell out me, humiliated me—you expect me to love the guy?”

“So why’d *you* come along, then?”

“Don’t change the subject. I have my reasons.”

“Could they maybe include getting out of that cell? But doesn’t that cell sound good about now,” she added, looking up. It had just started to rain gently. The clouds had moved back in, apparently, while they slept.

“Yeah,” he agreed ruefully. “That was part of it. What about you? You sweet on the man?”

She pulled the top of her sleeping bag over her head and scrunched down in it. Muffled, her voice, barely audible, said: “Sure, that’s it—guy kills my dad, so I’m after his bod. That’d be vaguely Freudian, wouldn’t it, in a roundabout, sick sort of way? No, I’m not ‘sweet’ on the guy any more than you are.

“I’m just reserving judgment”—she said the word with special emphasis—“on our Mr. Flynn.”

“That doesn’t answer my question...” LaRue started to say, but the rain picked up, drowning the words while threatening to drown them.

They settled down to a miserable night. LaRue’s one consolation was that Flynn had left his sleeping bag open to the elements.



They awoke the next morning to the smell of coffee and biscuits. Flynn was sitting up with the bottom part of his sleeping bag open and wrapped around his shoulders, reading a newspaper. It took a few moments for the incongruity of the homey scene to sink in.

“What the...?” O’Connor said, sitting up and being rewarded for her efforts by a puddle of water running from her bag onto her lap. “Where have *you* been?”

“Reconnoitering. Wandering.” He gestured to the thermos of coffee and the pile of biscuits. “Pilfering.” He put down the paper. “You’ll be happy to know that Monty and Chekhov made it in okay. I checked up on them early this morning.”

O’Connor and LaRue shared a look. It was a *long* way into the city, and Flynn hadn’t been gone all that long.

“What if you’d been seen, captured?” LaRue asked.

“Not bloody likely,” Flynn said nonchalantly, turning back to his paper. “Dig in, guys. You two are next in line for a trip to the big city.”



About midday, Jean-Paul Verfaille and Fiona Murray arrived at their hotel. They, too, were tourists, and it appeared they knew the Sakarov-Noir couple. They were surprised but pleased when they ran into them at dinner that evening; there were a number of toasts and reminiscences that the four made a deadly serious game of keeping consistent.

Flynn slept alone at the camp that evening for a few hours. When both of Athena’s larger moons were down, he arose, buried the camp gear, hoisted his pack, and triggered. He ran the forty-some kilometers to Atkinson, the nearest mass transit terminus that was not part of the city, breaking several Federation-wide marathon records along the way. He checked into a nondescript hotel, pausing in the restaurant for a very large meal, chased with a couple of liters of water, then a nap to let his body rapidly digest it all and replenish his depleted fat stores after the long run.

The next morning, William DeVere boarded the train for University City, just another bored office worker sandwiched in among the others, probably bound for one of the university’s admin buildings. His face wasn’t familiar to the others on the train, but then, turnover was high. Half the people on the train didn’t look familiar to the other half. Should he decide to stay in town for a few days rather than commute, no one either here or in the city would raise an eyebrow.

By a strange coincidence that’s just what he decided to do; especially after unexpectedly seeing that four of his good friends who now lived so far away were also in town.



Now, a day later, three of them sit dejectedly trying to plan their next move. Flynn, O’Connor, and Chekhov occupy a table as isolated as possible at a crowded sidewalk café. LaRue and Montenegro have left to follow up a clue gained from a student they met at a bar last night.

Under other circumstances, the afternoon would be pleasant. The sky is a clear, beautiful green-blue (which they heard students calling “grue” for some strange, smug reason) save for some puffy, almost jolly-looking white clouds. The air is warm, with a slightly spicy tang from the native vegetation; and the café au lait is very good.

The café is the last of a row of restaurants and shops on a street that runs along the top of a minor cliff overlooking a ravine that has been turned into a park on both sides of the meandering river at its center, one of two that cut through the city. Their table sits on the sidewalk just beyond the end of the buildings, adjacent to a bridge over a stream feeding the river, with a good view of the park.

It is mostly empty this time of day. Only a few parents sit watching their young children run noisily over the close-cropped grass and around the scattered trees along the riverbank. A few university students are there as well, some intent on studying, some on romance.

But it isn’t a pleasant afternoon, at least not for Flynn. Unless some lead to the student underground can be found, the five of them will have to undertake the mission by themselves, a daunting thought.

For the last two nights, they have, separately and together, haunted a selection of student hangouts that Flynn's information suggested might be frequented by members of the underground. No luck. The students were friendly enough, especially to Jean, who is close to their age, and Chekhov, who looks much younger than he really is. But the most subtle hint, the most oblique reference to the rebellion invariably caused them to clam up. Apparently Ocht has done a good job of teaching them caution.

Flynn found to his chagrin that he had trouble blending in with the students, at least the older ones. Not trouble in the sense that he can't do it, but in the sense that it takes tremendous effort on his part. Acting was once second nature to him. Now he is tired. He finds he just wants the mission to be over, to go home and rest. Perhaps his age is finally catching up with him. He feels stretched and thin.

“So, William, what now?” Chekhov asks.

“We wait, and try again tonight,” Flynn says. “One more night, then we try something else.”

“Try what?”

No answer, just a shrug.

“No luck finding your cousin yet?” asks O’Connor.

“No,” Chekhov says. “I call her several times a day, but she is never home. I can’t leave a message, obviously. And I’ve gone there and waited for her, but she doesn’t come home. I’m a little worried about her.”

“Relax, Piotr,” says Flynn. “There’s very little chance that the Man has been able to trace you to her. She’s probably just out of town, or staying over at a friend’s.”

“Maybe,” he says, unconvinced. “But she always was a hot-head. I’m just afraid she might have gotten mixed in the...local politics.”

“Surely Monty has some contacts here,” O’Connor says slowly. “After all, she’s from here. Then again, maybe...” She trails off.

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe she’s not really trying to find them. I don’t like to think about it, but she is one of O...I mean, the Man’s creations. She could still be on his payroll. I don’t believe it, but it’s a possibility you should consider. I say that speaking as a...speaking professionally.”

“Any one of you,” Flynn says quietly, “could be on his payroll. It’s a possibility I *have* considered...speaking professionally.”

He sips his coffee, not meeting their eyes.

An uncomfortable silence descends on them. Close by, but seeming a million miles away, is the sound of children laughing and arguing.

Chekhov abruptly stands, nearly knocking over his chair.

“Ilona!” he says, a grin spreading over his face. “Ilona Petrovna! It *is* you! How you’ve grown up!”

A tall, thin young woman walks toward them, trailed by LaRue and Montenegro. She has heavy eyebrows, dark hair, and an olive complexion, and her wide grin makes her somewhat plain face lovely. She and Chekhov embrace warmly.

“Where did you fall into such company, Pavel?” she asks teasingly, holding him at arms length to look at him. “They were asking around in the most obvious manner—if I had not been there, they would’ve wound up in prison for sure.”

LaRue has the good grace to look embarrassed as Flynn shoots him a nasty look, but Montenegro just shrugs and grins, as if to say, *We found her, didn’t we?*

“It’s Piotr, not Pavel,” he whispers. “And this is William DeVere and Fiona Murray. You’ve already met Jean-Paul and Monty, I suppose. Ladies and gentlemen, my cousin Ilona Petrovna Chekhov. But Ilona, don’t tell me that you’re involved in this reb...”

“Shh!” she interrupts, looking around quickly. Chekhov would be dead if Flynn’s glance could have killed. “Lord, cousin, do you want the whole world to hear? Let’s go somewhere safe to talk. Once I’m sure of your friends, I’ll arrange a meeting with *my* friends.”

# Chapter Seventeen

Flynn is not exactly the hit of the meeting; but then, he is not overwhelmed with Ilona's friends, either. The cell is a motley group of twenty or so students, most of whom looked more like simple malcontents than fervent revolutionaries.

The meeting is in the back room of a student dive bar in a seedy district at the edge of Old Town, the part of the only part of the city that was not razed and cleaned up when the university was built. The room is dingy-looking, and not only from the yellowish light cast from the two bare bulbs hanging by wires from the rough ceiling. Around the walls are haphazardly stacked barrels, kegs, boxes. In another day and age, Flynn knows, the room would have been smoke filled, but otherwise the people in it and their purposes would have been little different. Certainly the revolutionary demeanor has not changed much since he was a lad.

The erstwhile revolutionaries seem to like Chekhov well enough, and many seem downright smitten with O'Connor. LaRue, before he went out into the bar to keep watch, was mostly ignored. But they seem actively to dislike both Flynn and Montenegro. Montenegro has not said much, but her whole attitude and bearing almost scream contempt and coldness. Perhaps the students see the same thing in him. Monty is, after all, a reflection of sorts of himself.

"Why should we do anything you say?" asks a particularly earnest and ratty-looking man. He is one of the cell's two leaders.

"They aren't from here," he continues, turning to face the others. "It's not their fight. For all we know, they're planning to take over for the Federation—if that's really who they're from. Or they could be working for Ocht. We don't know, and we can't risk it."

Several mutters of approval greet this.

"Ilona's word is good enough for me," the other leader, Roberto Sargent says. His credibility with the group, Flynn suspects, is lessened on this issue, since he and Ilona are lovers. "Her cousin is one of them, and she grilled them all before bringing them here. I say we trust them. We have a chance to actually do something important for the cause. It's a worthwhile gamble. The most that will be lost is this one cell. We're expendable."

A disturbed mutter runs around the room. Apparently some present do not feel expendable.

"And *I* say," the ratty boy says, "that we're doing just fine by ourselves. We don't need them.

"Of course," he grins evilly and toys with a rather wicked-looking knife he has pulled from a sheath on his belt, "now that they have seen us, we may have to...dispose of them."

There is an alarmed stirring in the crowd. Flynn and Montenegro exchange amused glances. The ratty boy—Gustov Flahner is his name—is actually trying to frighten them.

Their amusement is not lost on Flahner. He flushes scarlet and steps toward them.

"We won't be disposing of anybody," Sargent says, grabbing his arm. "Put that stupid knife away, will you, Gustov?"

Flahner throws his hand off, but eases back a step.

"Yes, you're doing fine by yourselves," Flynn says, "but only because Ocht is using your revolution as a cover, as a smokescreen between himself and the Federation. And it's a smoke-

screen he won't need for much longer, not once he breaks ties and sells off the scientists and engineers.

"Do you actually think you're accomplishing anything with your petty terrorism? Midnight raids on supply depots that are probably mostly empty by the time you get there? Fire bombings that do little damage to the real target, though they may be allowed to do substantial collateral damage?

"Think back to how easy it has been; think of how efficient Ocht's security forces are. Are you sure you were being pursued? Oh, sure, you lost people, killed or captured—the game has to be believable, after all. But not many, I'll bet. I'll bet you gather here to lick your wounds and congratulate yourselves for your incredible luck, time and time again. But your organization has never been in any real danger, because you've never been any danger to Ocht. When he's free of the Federation, you'll have served your purpose. You'll be quickly found and shot, each and every one of you. Except possibly for his agents among you."

Sullen silence greets him. Some of them are thoughtful, possibly comparing what he has said to their own half-formed suspicions. Others just glare defiantly. It's their Cause he is denigrating, after all.

He is frustrated. He can't connect with these young earnest faces. He can feel the several hundred years them like palpable dust in the air between them.

"If you want to make a difference," O'Connor pleads, "listen to what he is saying. Don't you see? Ocht knows you, he allows you to exist only to the extent you're predictable and harmless—and not for much longer. We're unknown factors. We're highly trained in skills you need. We can be an element that surprises him, that makes your cell effective."

"Even assuming what you say is true—" Flahner challenges, "and I don't—what would you have us do?"

Flynn smiles and leans forward. Involuntarily, at something in his face, several of the students move slightly away. They have been play-acting at revolution, mostly, and now they realize suddenly that here is a professional, possibly a professional killer, in their midst. Their game has become serious, and very deadly.

"Our first move," Flynn says, "is to destroy the government and industry labs, to take away Ocht's bargaining chip with hostile governments."

If the silence before was sullen, now it is shocked. These students, as Flynn suspected, have before only contemplated penny-ante targets. Lobbing Molotov cocktails at government cars, bomb threats, maybe on an especially bold day, setting a bomb in a deserted train station. The government labs, though, they're guarded by real security guards, with real phasers—or worse. Attack those, and Ocht will no longer turn a tolerant eye.

Flahner turns to face his peers. "Don't listen to him! They want us to attack a target we're not ready for yet! We can't possibly hope to do any damage against the labs—it'd be a suicide stunt. I say DeVere and these others *are* Ocht's agents, sent to flush us out and get us killed. I say we deal with them, but not like they want."

He whirls suddenly to face Flynn, pushing his knife within inches of Flynn's throat. "I say we deal with them now."

Flynn doesn't flinch, doesn't even bother to trigger.

"Son," he says, realizing that he probably just opened that gap between him and the students another few meters, "if I wanted you dead, I would single-handedly kill every one of you. And absolutely nothing you or that pathetic knife"—in a flash, Flynn now holds the knife—"could do would prevent it."

"Big words," Flahner says, nonetheless backing away.

Sargent is frowning, but apparently not at the little tableau with Flahner. He seems to have dismissed that from his consideration. "But if we attack the government labs, what about the scientists and engineers? If we blow up the labs, we'll probably kill them, too."

"I'm not worried," Flynn replies, but is interrupted as the door facing him bursts open, disgorging a dozen or more armored figures. Peering between them, he can see others in the bar beyond. Patrons of the bar, now being held at phaser-point, look both scared and curious. LaRue is being held helpless between two of the armored guards. He looks sheepishly at Flynn.

"Nobody move," their leader growls, sweeping the room with her rifle for emphasis. "You move, you die. Now, where are the off-worlders?"

Flynn is triggered now, but remains motionless, hoping for some diversion. It is all he can do to stand still. He catches Chekhov's eye and makes a small motion, hoping he will understand what he wants. He sees Montenegro out of the corner of his eye. She is grinning slightly, poised on the balls of her feet, ready to spring.

*Come on, Chekhov, he thinks, before she does something stupid.*

Chekhov clears his throat. Instantly, the leader's rifle covers him.

"Off-worlders?" he asks innocently. "What off-worlders? There's been a mistake. This is a meeting of the University chess club. My name is Piotr Ilyavich Sakarov. I'm a Russian. Russians invented chess, you know..."

"Shut up!" the leader yells.

But it's too late. The other guards are momentarily distracted, and the two augments are already moving rapidly, swinging around the students toward the soldiers. Before they can react, they are among them.

Flynn punches a soldier's midriff, then swears as his hand throbs momentarily before the endorphins squelch the pain. The soldier's body armor was soft to the touch, but hardened instantly on impact. The soldier begins to smile, but prematurely. Flynn switches targets, sending a backfist into the side of the soldier's head, hard enough to break his neck, armor or no. He picks up the soldier's limp form and uses the body to bludgeon down two others.

Montenegro has not been idle. As he watches, she rips a plate of armor off a guard and punches him in the stomach hard enough that he can see a vague outline of her hand distend the armor covering the man's back. Another dead or unconscious soldier—Flynn would bet on dead—is at her feet.

Closer to the front of the room, O'Connor is on top of another soldier, trying to wrestle his helmet off. LaRue is beside her, neatly sparring, a calm smile on his face. Flynn has no idea how he got free.

Something is naggingly odd about the leader, he can see that as she quickly turns and assesses the situation. Their eyes lock, and there is mutual recognition.

*Augment.*

She brings her weapon up faster than any human should be able to.

Flynn grabs a barrel and throws it at her. She has little choice but to block it, and before she can recover, he is upon her, ripping the rifle from her hand. Now it is just augment to augment, an even match.

*Or would be, if it wasn't for the damned armor;* he thinks.

"Monty," Flynn shouts over the bedlam of the fight, "clean up—the leader's an augment."

He circles warily around his adversary, hoping Montenegro can at least keep any remaining guards from shooting him in the back, but he can't spare the time to glance her way. A well-placed roundhouse kick barely misses his head. He ducks and moves away, circles.

The only vulnerable spot in the armor is the neck and face, and she undoubtedly knows her own suit's weaknesses. Otherwise, a gleaming white shell covers her from head to foot. She is about his size, predator's eyes glaring from a hard, handsome face. He is fighting an internal battle to remain rational; she is not so encumbered.

She lashes out with a kick. He automatically drops an arm to block it, feels the pain from the contact with body armor lance up his nerves to impale his brain for a brief second before it vanishes. The bones in his arm do not break, but it is a near thing. The kick was a feint. She lands a glancing punch to his chest, knocking the wind out of him. But when she steps in to finish him off, he is ready and grabs her arm, tossing her across the room to land in a rough heap among splintered and dripping kegs of beer. Instantly, she is back on her feet. The room begins to smell like a brewery.

They close again, circle. His chest and arm are injured, and he knows that when the changes wear off they'll hurt like hell. She is unhurt. He would remedy that, if he could only rip off her armor. But to do that, he would have to hold her away while simultaneously peeling it off—easy enough to do with a soldier, but impossible with another augment.

Something flashes toward the other augment. Startled, Flynn glances at it before realizing that it could be a trick. But it isn't. It's Sargento coming to his aid. It is futile, and it distracts her only for as long as it takes for her to grab the boy and break his neck.

Only a fraction of a second, but enough for Flynn to penetrate her guard. He leaves himself open to a brutal, but non-fatal, flurry of short punches before getting close enough to aim an elbow strike at the only place that is likely to be effective, her face. She tries to get her arms up, to get her head away, but too late. With all his augmented strength, he buries his elbow in her face and up, hearing, with great satisfaction, bones crunch. She leaves the ground, then lands and staggers back, already dead. She falls, just as the first blood begins to gush down the front of her armor.

For a second, even triggered and ostensibly not thinking rationally, Flynn can do little but stare at his fallen foe. Except for Monty, he has not fought another augment since his escape from Earth. He has not seen an augment killed for close to two hundred years. But here, at his feet, is another of his ilk, dead. He feels, just for a moment, a feeling of dread, his mortality almost a tangible thing casting a shadow over him.

He shakes his head and turns back to survey the battle. The students are all arrayed in a semicircle against the walls, simultaneously giving him the impression of being on stage at some bizarre amphitheater and of walking through a field of cattle and having them all stop suddenly and stare at you with those big, dumb eyes.

O'Connor is sitting on the floor catching her breath. LaRue is on his back, unconscious but beginning to stir. Chekhov has a cut over his eye, but otherwise seems okay as he stands protectively in front of his cousin, who is staring open-mouthed at the limp form of Sargent, tears streaming down her cheeks.

As for Montenegro, she looks like some pagan deity of the hunt, Artemis surveying her vanquished prey. Still triggered, her eyes glittering and wearing a savage grin, she stands atop a mound of half a dozen dead or dying guards.

It is at her and Flynn that the horrified eyes of the students gaze, as if at the aftermath of some fearsome natural disaster.

“Quick,” Flynn yells, scooping up the leader’s phaser rifle from the floor. “Monty, get these students out of here, I’ll catch up later.”

Through the barroom door, he can see other guards making their way quickly toward them. A phaser vaporizes a section of doorframe by his head; he returns fire, sees a guard evaporate in the beam.

Monty hasn’t moved. He has to repeat himself, then slap her hard before she rouses from the bloodlust-induced high. For a second, she is on the verge of attacking him, then the light of intelligence again peeks through her eyes. She nods and herds the students roughly out of the room by the back door.

Fighting an urge to leave it as it is, he reluctantly reduces the rifle’s setting to “stun.” He drops the first guard through the door, ducks a phaser blast, then gains the door. Crouching, he fans the room, stunning foe and neutral alike. When nothing any longer moves, he drops the rifle, retrieves his hand phaser, and sprints to catch up with the others.



Twenty minutes later, in a safehouse in one of the city’s most squalid sectors, the remaining students and Flynn’s team reconvene. The tone is different this time. The students that aren’t in shock are attentive, willing to listen, fearful. Even Flahner allows himself to look like the frightened young man he is. Several of them are crying, several hurt. Flynn addresses them while O’Connor tends their wounds as best she can. Chekhov tries to comfort his cousin, who is weeping disconsolately.

“I’m afraid you have no choice but to throw in with us now,” he says wearily.

He and Montenegro have let the changes subside for now. Wave after wave of pain scratch along his nervous system, his chest aches where he was kicked, and his arm feels as if it will surely fall off.

Though scant consolation, Monty looks like he feels. A great florid bruise has blossomed on the left side of her face.

“Fortunately or unfortunately, we are now in this together. We have drawn Ocht’s attention to your cell. Even if we leave, you will still be hunted and interrogated. Our only hope now is to bring Ocht down—destroy his labs, his augments, then him.”

Montenegro reacts with a start, then studies him pensively. He does not notice. Maybe the students have no idea what an “augment” is, but she sure does.

“Bring him down?” Flahner croaks, no longer the rebel’s rebel he was an hour ago. “You can’t mean that—just this cell, against his whole apparatus?”

“Not just this cell, Gustov,” Flynn says gently, matter-of-factly. “This cell and us. That makes a big difference. It can make all the difference.”

# Chapter Eighteen

Some things are universal across human-inhabited worlds. One such thing is the subjective duration of those last fifteen minutes of a work shift, especially near midnight. For the two bored techs manning the transporter room at one of the orbital uploading stations, the clock seems to move like a calendar.

At one time, the room must have been a sparkling, shining monument to Athena's high technology. Now, though, little remains of that antiseptic splendor. Innumerable crates have banged into the console and the walls, uncounted booted feet have scuffed the transporter platform. One of the overhead lighting panels has taken to flickering every few minutes, giving an occasional faint strobe-like eeriness to the comings and goings of the soldiers, satellite personnel, and cargo that are the stock in trade of this station. The technicians are rumpled, too, as if they were designed of a piece with the transporter room.

It has been a long day. There was that shipment of farm equipment incoming from an independent cargo tug, then a crew turnover for Defsat 22 to handle. That one was tricky, since the finicky old transporters were not really too trustworthy except for line-of-sight, and with 22, that was pushing it. Then they were on standby while Defsat 3 was under attack in case casualties had to be evacuated. Even worse, no orders came, just interminable waiting with nothing to do.

The technicians were told to stand down from alert only a few minutes ago with no explanation—not that the higher-ups ever bother to give them explanations, of course. That's the way it is when you're thought of as little more than quasi-living parts of your electronic and mechanical charges, the technicians know.

They assumed, though, that the defsat had destroyed its attacker, a Federation starship according to the gossip, with no injuries needing evacuation. The assumption was natural enough. Defsats are awesome pieces of equipment, ones that most Athenians even vaguely connected to the military are immensely proud of.

Now, they wait out their shift, sitting on crates of local fruit awaiting transport to a ship due in orbit tomorrow, playing cards and cursing each other good-naturedly. The citrus-cinnamon smell of the fruit wafts up around them.

“Get that, will you, Smiley?” the older of the two says as the control panel behind them bleats.

Smiley, a wiry man in his early thirties, sighs. “No rest for the wicked tonight, is there? Wonder who's sending that in and why they couldn't wait ten bloody minutes till we're off shift!”

He ambles over to the console to accept shipment, but sees the override indicator flick on before he has a chance.

“Who's mucking around with my equipment...?” he mutters, then looks up to see three pillars of coruscating light appear on the transporter platform. They begin to assume material form.

Smiley straightens up and tries to assume a professional demeanor. The forms are human, and wearing uniforms. He curses them for showing up on his shift, but silently.

“Good evening, sirs, and welcome...” he begins, then notices that the newcomers are not wearing uniforms he recognizes. In fact, they are wearing some sort of body armor.

“Geof!” he yells to his companion, but too late. The newly-materialized figures shoot both technicians as soon as the transporter allows them to move.

“Bones,” Kirk says, “Check that one by the console—make sure he didn’t hurt himself too badly when he fell. Or worse yet, make sure he didn’t hit an alarm on his way down!”

Spock examines the other technician critically. “I suggest, Captain, that we divest ourselves of this armor and that two of us use their uniforms.”

“Good idea, Spock. Bones, you and Spock take their uniforms; do something about your ears, Spock. If we meet anyone on the way out of here—wherever here might be—I’m your prisoner, got it? Ocht may have broadcast pictures of me. Tell them you were on duty when I beamed down, now you’re taking me to security.”

“And if security is who stops us?” drawls McCoy.

Kirk smiles wryly. “Then I guess you and Spock will get to trade uniforms again.”



Spock and McCoy, dressed now in ill-fitting security uniforms, emerge from the glass door of the building’s foyer, Kirk in tow between them, wearing one of the transporter techs’ red uniforms. Spock has a soft hat, doubtfully regulation, jammed down over the tips of his ears.

The night is moonless, clear, and still. Stars glimmer prettily in unfamiliar constellations. Directly overhead, a smudge of light softly glows greenish-yellow.

Defsat 3, Kirk assumes. It fades noticeably as he watches. He wishes his responsibility for the dead on board would fade as easily.

The air carries a warm softness that whispers of the nearby ocean. A heavy, almost cloying fragrance seeps from the plate-sized white blossoms of trees around the transport station. Amber globes bathe the mostly-empty parking lot with light that seems palpable, creeping over and around the few ground and hover cars sitting there. It makes Kirk think of a shore leave he took a few years back on Earth, to Florida.

“Now where, Captain?” Spock asks.

“Toward the city, Mr. Spock. Maybe we can borrow one of those.”

“Captain,” Spock says cautiously, “are you suggesting that we purloin one of the ground conveyances?”

“Exactly, Spock. Think you can... ‘hot wire it,’ I think the term is?”

“I believe so, Captain,” he says, still cautiously. “But perhaps I should drive? I recall the last time you drove such a vehicle...”

McCoy looks from one to the other as Kirk looks offended.

“Fine,” he says. “*I’ll* drive.”



The car proves surprisingly easy to break into and start. After three kilometers, McCoy just about has the hang of driving; at least he thinks so. Spock and Kirk have spent the last kilometer

or so staring straight ahead, hands gripping the dashboard, as he transitioned from lurching mode to rocketing down the highway mode and back again.

“There’s University City up ahead,” he says.

“Thank God,” Kirk breathes.

“What’s that, Jim?”

“That’s good, I said.”

“May I suggest,” says Spock, “that we abandon the car as soon as possible and walk into the city? If the owners have reported it stolen, or if the guards were found, we are likely to be less conspicuous without the vehicle.”

“Safer, too,” Kirk says under his breath as McCoy sends the car around a curve faster than its designers would have thought possible.

Spock nods, surreptitiously but wholeheartedly.

# Chapter Nineteen

Kirk hunches his shoulders and bends over his bacon and eggs as the door bangs open. A security man swaggers in, all epaulets and spit-shined shoes.

A dingy billed cap shadows Kirk's face. Beside him, Spock looks strangely in place in his turban and loose clothing, both stolen from a clothesline last night; there are a lot of Sikhs at Athena University. With some cheap instant tan from a store to hide his green complexion, he blends in surprisingly well. McCoy, at Kirk's other elbow, is equally inconspicuous in a vaguely disreputable tweed jacket from a closet too close to an open window, a retro professorial style recently gaining popularity in parts of the Federation.

The security man is baby-faced, yet tough-looking, like an infant trying to out-bluster a playmate for a favorite toy. But his body is large, and his hand never strays far from his sidearm. The door opens again, and his partner enters. She is a young woman with centimeter-long hair standing on end, a serious frown, and hard eyes. She stands with her back to the door, watching everyone, while the man swaggers down the diner's counter.

The first man he comes to looks up and smiles nervously. The cop growls "Whadya lookin' at?" and glares at him until he huddles back over his food. He comes to Spock and stops.

"What kind of get-up is that?" he sneers. "Where you from, boy?"

Spock looks like anything but a "boy". Nevertheless, he does his best to look polite and startled. "New Bombay, sir," he says, in a lilting accent that Kirk thinks would probably offend an actual Indian. Probably good enough for the guard, though. He hopes. "Here to study particle physics."

If the cop was hoping to detect falsehood in his eyes by sheer strength of will and fierce glare, he is disappointed by the Vulcan's poise. Kirk just hopes that the turban doesn't slip. Though there are many Vulcans on the planet, there are probably few that match the description undoubtedly obtained when the transporter guards woke up last night.

And fewer still wearing fake Sikh clothing and instant tan.

He moves on to Kirk.

"You. Yeah, you, Mac." He nudges Kirk. "Look around here."

Kirk turns slowly, trying to act frightened. He is simultaneously calculating angles. He could easily grab the man's pistol, kill him or at least put him out of action with a blow to the neck as he gets to his feet. But the guard by the door looks anything but inattentive. Or he could try to get the phaser from his own belt, but even if he is successful, it will be as good as a dropping a calling card for the next security team on the scene.

"Where do you live?"

"At the flophouse, I mean, the boarding house up the street," he says, hoping the guard won't think to call and check.

"How long?"

"How long what?" he says, trying to think of a good answer.

"How long you been here, idiot?"

“A week,” he says sullenly.

“Strange,” the cop says, moving his hand closer to his pistol. “The old lady up there says all her boarders checked in in the last couple of days.”

Kirk can sense the others in the diner looking at them. The waiter has ceased even pretending to be busy, and the owner has been drying her hands so long they must be getting raw by now.

“Look here, son,” McCoy says to the guard. “I don’t know who you are or what gives you the right to come in here and hassle people, but I *have* seen this man around for well over a week. This is the first morning I’ve eaten here on my way to work, but I’ve seen him in other restaurants around here. Now why don’t you leave him alone?”

“Well, Mr. Professor,” the guard sneers, “maybe you can tell me why you eat in this part of Old City on your way to the university?”

“First of all, I never said I was a professor, but if I had, it would be *doctor* to an uneducated lout like you. And secondly...”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish. The guard sputters and swings a ham-sized fist, clipping him on the ear as he ducks.

Kirk is on his feet, blocking Spock from acting. A plan has come to him, hopefully not hare-brained, and to pull it off, he needs to be the one to take care of the soldier.

He grabs the man from behind, an arm around his throat, and turns him to put him between himself and the other guard at the same time he punches him hard twice in the kidneys. The soldier slumps against him. He slides a hand around the man’s sidearm even as he sees his partner bring her weapon up. She’ll stun them both, sort it out later. It’s going to be close.

He twists the pistol in the holster, not bothering to draw, and prays that it is set below a killing level. The woman is illuminated briefly, then flies backward to slam into the juke box behind her. As she slides down unconscious on the floor, an old pongo tune begins to wail, the lead singer sweetly exhorting the listeners to burn down the world.

He pulls the pistol from the holster and lets the guard fall. A slight hand signal warns Spock and McCoy to remain where they are. He waves the pistol around melodramatically.

“Okay,” he says, backing toward the door. “Nobody move. You, sister,” he says, pointing at the cashier. “While you’re standing there, make yourself useful and fill up a sack from that cash drawer. Might as well get some mileage out of this thing.” He holds up the gun. “Now!” he barks.

Spock and McCoy exchange glances. Spock seems as perplexed as McCoy feels. *This is the way to stay unobtrusive? A hold-up?*

“Thanks, lady,” Kirk says, taking the sack. She looks almost bored. He supposes that in the old part of the city, robbery is nothing new. “Step back from the counter, though—I don’t want to get hit with whatever you have under there.”

She smiles a little, wearily, then shrugs and steps carefully back, holding her hands up placatingly.

“When these two wake up, you can tell ‘em for me not to mess with Josie the Knife—I may be new around here, but they’ll learn to respect me soon enough.”

He backs out and is gone.

The entire clientele suddenly has the same burning desire to be elsewhere before reinforcements for the soldiers arrive. It is as if the diner were filled with water, and someone opened the door. Within seconds, the waitress and cashier have the place to themselves.

“Now what?” murmurs McCoy to Spock as they trot down an alley.

Spock is about to reply when they hear someone hiss from behind a dumpster.

“Pssst! Over here!” Kirk stands up and motions them over.

“Jim, what the hell was that all about?”

“Just getting us out of a sticky situation, Bones.”

“‘Josie the Knife?’” Spock asks, raising an eyebrow.

Kirk grins. “An aging cowboy, Mr. Spock. Have to enjoy myself sometime, don’t I? I don’t get out much anymore.”

McCoy just grunts and shakes his head. “I take it you have a plan?”

“Always, Bones,” he says. “Always.”



By the next evening, their second on-planet, Kirk begins to think that his plan is working out for everyone but himself.

Spock almost immediately found a job as a VR programmer, though when Kirk spoke to him this morning, he seemed reticent to say what the format of the virtual reality worlds were that he was putting on the little cubes. If Kirk didn’t know better, he would swear the Vulcan was embarrassed. Probably porn; but if so, it must really be something. Vulcans aren’t exactly prudes.

He was more forthcoming in his assessment of his chances of breaking into the planetary net from the lowly access point of the VR shop: practically nil. Well, that is not entirely true, he amended—breaking in is easy; breaking into any sites that have information about the Federation projects, that’s another story.

McCoy has been similarly fortunate. He volunteered at a run-down hospital at the edge of the university section of town, the kind of place that is chronically short of staff even in good times, and these were most certainly not good times for the medical community.

There have been many casualties of the rebellion recently. Perhaps the revolutionaries were emboldened by *Enterprise*’s appearance, or perhaps one of Flynn’s cells still survived and decided to become active after guessing that the operative sent to contact them had been killed. In any case, the increased number of patients only compounded the problem caused by the sequestering of the Federation personnel, since there was a good many medical staff in that number—some of the best on the planet. Especially hard-hit were the teaching hospitals close to the university.

All it took was an interview and a vague promise to have his records forwarded, and McCoy was on staff. As of this afternoon, his cautious nosing around had not turned up any hard leads to where the Fed medical people might be. Apparently Ocht was able even to control the local grapevine to an impressive extent.

Still, despite their own setbacks, Spock and McCoy were making progress, while all Kirk has been doing all day is going from one seedy bar to another, nursing drinks and trying to feel around for the local underworld.

Not that the criminal element has been all that hard to find. He is now sharing a bar with three prostitutes, one male, one female, and one, an Andastasian, of indeterminate sex; a small-time, self-proclaimed thief; an ex-con who has just gotten out of prison after doing time for murder; and a drug dealer who's been making sales from a booth in the back as if it were a pharmacy. And that's not counting the crap game that is noisily going on in the back room—the very back room, so said the bartender, a loquacious, scar-faced hulk of a man, that had just been raided by government troops to take out a group of rebels. The rebels had won that round, the man said, obviously pleased. Left bodies all over the room for him to clean up.

Overall, the rebellion seems more like a sporting event to these people than anything serious; but maybe that is just here in the Old Town. After all, life here is brutal and often short; a rebellion isn't much worse than usual. As long as both the rebels and the government keep collateral damage to a minimum—and they have so far—why worry? It's good entertainment.

Besides, it will be over soon—that is the common sentiment. The rebels are by and large a collection of pathetic misfits, with here and there a few, like the ones in the back room earlier, who are more professional.

From the sound of it, Kirk would really like to meet the ones who bested the security folks. It sounds like an effective cell, though the story probably has grown in the telling. Could even be that some of the Federation operatives have survived. But if he tries to contact them now, he loses whatever chance he has of contacting the local crime syndicates. Besides, the trail—if there was a trail—is now very cold. He's also pretty sure that if anyone started poking around now, Ocht's men would be all over them in a flash.

So much Kirk has learned about the bar's denizens, its history, and the projected future of the rebellion, but he has yet to get any closer to finding out anything about the Fed projects, or to finding anyone who might know anything about them.

❖

“How 'bout another one, for the road?”

The thief stands just to Kirk's left, money in hand, looking at the bartender. He turns to look at Kirk and visibly puffs himself up.

“Got a job tonight,” he says.

Kirk regards him, smiles a slow half-smile. “Oh? Big one?”

“Big enough.” He takes a gulp of the beer the bartender has set in front of him, squints at Kirk. “Maybe you'd like a piece of it.”

Kirk pretends to think it over. “Maybe.”

The thief gets his beer, motions for Kirk to follow him over to a dimly-lit booth in a back corner. They slide into the sticky embrace of the red fake leather seats, and Kirk waits patiently until the thief has taken another long pull on his drink.

“Name's Ligo,” the thief says.

He is a ferret-faced little man, not muscular, but wiry and with that sure, quick manner that can make even experienced street fighters a little nervous. His hair, a bit oily, is pulled back into a pony tail that is tied off with a twist that has a silver skull and crossbones on it. He is dressed in cheap knock-offs of current local business fashion: wine-red pin-striped pants, pleated, with a black collarless linen tailored jacket buttoned over them, no shirt. His sockless feet are stuck into narrow shiny black shoes.

He has holulings on three fingers. One shows a miniature, rather tacky religious scene—could be Christian, could be a local thing. Another shows a naked woman in what Kirk assumes is supposed to be an alluring pose. The third is of more interest to Kirk. It is of obvious high quality, and projects a tiny, finely-detailed scene of a right hand firmly enclosing a planet, the continents and oceans showing between the fingers. The briefing material supplied by Flynn contained information about the local underworld. Either Ligo is in the local mafia, or he is stupid enough to wear a stolen mafia ring.

Maybe his luck is starting to change.

“You’re Josie, right?”

Kirk doesn’t have to feign surprise. “Yeah. How’d you know that?”

“Heard about your little stunt down at the Red Bull. One of my buddies was in there, says you did real good.”

He takes another sip, studying Kirk. Kirk toys with several possible facial expressions, decides to play it cool; he nods slightly, accepting the compliment.

“I could use some muscle tonight. Cut you in for, say, ten percent of the take. You interested?”

“Depends,” Kirk said. “What and how much?”

“You let me worry about the what—I don’t know you enough to trust you yet. The how much... Let’s say your part’s a thousand marks.”

He did a quick mental calculation to decide what his degree of response should be. A thousand marks, in the local economy, would be enough for someone of his supposed stature in the scheme of things to live in relative luxury for a month.

He whistles appreciatively. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m in.”

“Good.” Ligo tells him an address and a time, downs the last of his beer, then slithers from the bar.



The address is in a relatively prosperous shopping neighborhood just outside Old Town proper. Kirk arrived early to check it out; there is no sign of Ligo. He kills a half hour or so at a nearby sidewalk cafe. The waiter eyes him uncertainly—his clothes were purchased in Old Town, and seem to scream out “wrong side of the tracks” to the man—but serves him a coffee without complaint.

Ligo sees him about the same time he sees Ligo; he comes and sits at Kirk’s table, waving off the waiter.

“So, Josie,” Ligo says. “Punctual.” He pronounces it carefully, as if it is a new word for him. “I like that.”

“Professional all the way,” Kirk says. “That’s me. So where’s the mark?”

Ligo looks at him with some amusement. “You aren’t from around here, are you?”

“Mark,’ ” he repeats, shaking his head. “The *tick* is that jewelry store behind me, third the way down the block, on the right. We go behind it in ten minutes. Every day, the old man who owns the place sends his son out the back door with the day’s take to put in the bank. We *told* the old man he should buy some insurance, but he wouldn’t listen.”

Kirk nods. An old routine, protection rackets. Something almost quaint about it, if it wasn’t so deadly serious. And on a Federation world, no matter how near secession. *That* galls him.

“What am I here for, window dressing?”

“Nah, when I say ‘son,’ I don’t mean no kid. This guy is huge, a real martial arts type. You’ll earn your keep.” He looks meaningfully at Kirk. “We don’t want him dead, even if he kicks up a fuss about handing over the old man’s money. Just bruised a little.”

“Why not just stun him?”

Ligo shakes his head again, a look of disgust crossing his weaselly face.

“You got a lot to learn, my boy. First of all, he’s got to know *why* he’s losing the money, and second, he’s got to be scared, real scared.”

Kirk makes a silent “oh” with his mouth and nods.

The store fronts may look up-scale, but the back alley is pure Old Town. There is a pungent scent of rotting garbage in the air, mixed with the sharp smell of urine. Trash is everywhere, overflowing the dumpsters and almost making a carpet underfoot. Rusted fire escapes hang from the buildings like rickety stalactites. Down the alley a ways, two of the city’s myriad homeless are arranging their flops for the night.

They take their positions, Kirk behind a dumpster to the left of the jewelry store’s back exit, Ligo behind some bags of greenish foam packing material to the door’s right.

The wait seems interminable, but eventually they hear the sound of bolts being slid, and the door swings open toward Kirk. A huge blond man steps around it, wearing a better version of Ligo’s outfit, and carefully locks the door behind him. He is carrying a canvas bag that jingles slightly, the coins apparently being muffled by paper money and checks, which are still popular on this planet.

“You shouldn’t walk around with all that money, sonny,” Ligo says, smiling at his own wit.

“What do you want?” the man says, his voice deep, annoyed, and very confident. “You better go work out at the gym for a while if you’re planning on making any trouble for me.”

“Ah, I got a friend.” He nods in Kirk’s direction.

Kirk steps out from behind the dumpster, trying to look as menacing as he can.

The man laughs. Kirk can feel himself flushing.

“This the best the mob can do, one little weasel and one old crone?”

“Weasel, eh?” Suddenly there’s a knife in Ligo’s hand. It makes a blur as he passes it from hand to hand. “That’ll cost you a little blood to go with the money, my lad.”

Without hesitation, the man throws the bag of money at Ligo, hitting him square in the face and dazing him. He spins quickly and lunges at Kirk.

It's really not fair, Kirk thinks, studying the man's attack. Here he is, an "old crone," and this youngster has him by twenty kilos and half a head, not to mention the odd decade or two. *And* the guy has obviously had some first-class training.

Ten seconds later, the boy is on the ground, groaning, and Kirk is helping Ligo up.

Not fair at all.

"You're kinda old, but you're quick," Ligo says approvingly, rubbing his nose. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"Starfleet Academy," he says truthfully, enjoying the look of wonder that spreads over Ligo's face, as if he had uttered arcane words of magic. "A long time ago. They booted me out, but they taught me a thing or two."

"I'll say."

Ligo kneels by the boy. "Tell your old man," he says, "he needs to get himself some insurance. It's a tough neighborhood, and *you're* no protection. Next time, it won't be just a beating."

The boy groans out some rather unlikely, though anatomically interesting, possibilities for Ligo in particular and the mafia in general to consider.

"I'm sorry you feel that way," Ligo says reasonably, standing up. Without warning, he kicks the boy hard in the face. Kirk winces, aching to teach Ligo just how good his training really is, but with an effort holds back.

"Show that shiner to your old man. He might feel differently, being as how it's his only boy and all. Come to think of it, maybe you should show him this, as well."

Ligo draws back his foot to kick again, but this time he is spun around by Kirk. He seems to consider fighting, but, having just seen Kirk's handiwork, he decides against it.

"What?" he demands.

"You don't want to kill the boy," Kirk says, striving to keep anger from his voice. "Like you said. Leave him like this. You won't get the father to pay if the son's dead, only if he's afraid for him."

He considers for a moment, anger at odds with whatever native business acumen he has. Slowly, he relaxes.

"You're probably right, Josie," he admits. "You're lucky this guy was here," he says to the boy, who is moaning softly. "Next time you might not be so lucky."

He picks up the cash and they lope off down the alley.

"Where we going now, Ligo?" Kirk says when they stop to get their breath, well inside Old Town.

"You're sticking with me for a while. We'll split the loot at Xelda's." The bar where they met.

"You did a good job tonight. I think my boss will want to meet you."

# Chapter Twenty

“Well, aren’t you the dandy,” McCoy says.

The three of them are in what Mrs. Yakob calls her “drawing room.” It is a tiny room at the front of the flophouse, its dingy windows looking out onto the shady commerce always underway in this part of town. The carpet looks like it has been chewed on by moths, but that they finally gave up. Or maybe starved to death. Perhaps it was once red, or maybe green, or possibly it has always been that ugly shade of brown. There is wallpaper on the walls, something Kirk hasn’t seen for a long, long time. Flowers and pineapples. Large. Repetitive. Slightly maddening. The furniture matches the room perfectly. That is, it is equally hideous.

Kirk fingers the cheap material of his new wine-red pants.

“These old things?” he says. “Just my working clothes.”

“I take it you’re in?”

“I’m in.” He catches himself before he can add “like Flynn.” That thought only reminds him of the late spy, and his missing crewmen.

“Have you found out anything?”

He sighs. “Not a thing. Ligo—my contact—has hinted that there’s going to be a big ‘job’ next week involving some scientific equipment.”

“A government lab?” Spock asks.

“I don’t think the local mafia is stupid enough to take on Ocht.” He shakes his head. “But they are pretty stupid, come to think of it. Did you send that credit chit like I asked?”

“I dropped it off at the jewelry store on the way to work,” Spock said. “No one saw me. May I ask what it was for?”

“My conscience,” Kirk replies. “Speaking of your job...”

Spock shifts in his chair, looks out the window.

McCoy can no longer stand it. “What is it with you and that job, Spock? Those VR cubes you sell some kind of kinky stuff, or what?”

“I would rather not discuss it, Doctor,” Spock says.

“I know, Spock,” he grins, “I know.”

Seeing that Kirk is also not going to let it rest, Spock sighs.

“If you two must *must* know...” They nod, grinning. He sighs again. “Very well. The cubes are Dadaist fantasies.”

A look of vast disgust—at least for a Vulcan—crosses his face.

“We Vulcans are quite tolerant of what other cultures call deviant tastes. We value infinite diversity. But nonsense is so antithetical to everything our society is built upon.” He shakes his head in an almost human manner. “No, Doctor, I wish they *were* some sort of extravagant porn; that would not bother me in the least.”

Kirk finds himself both amused and somehow disappointed. “Anyway, what have you learned?” he asks.

"I finally managed to break into the more secure areas of the planetary net. I was able to gather from indirect references in e-mail between some of Ocht's minor functionaries some idea of where one of the Federation or defense industry laboratories might be. I shall endeavor today to break in again to pinpoint it more exactly. Unfortunately, the net uses a shifting security scheme that makes a second intrusion as difficult as the first. However, at least I now know it can be done."

"Great, Spock. Keep us informed. Bones?"

"I don't have anything blatant, either, I'm afraid. However, I nosed around the medical records at the hospital, and judging by the amount of drugs and other medical supplies that have been leaving the hospital, and the number of ambulances ferrying doctors to the same code-named location, I'd be willing to bet there's a large group of people somewhere relatively nearby who are being kept together and tended to on a regular basis."

"The Federation people?"

"Nothing certain in the records, but who else? Judging by the records, the place they're being held, called 'The Warren,' is somewhere within a ten kilometer radius of the hospital."

"Very good, Bones, keep at it. I want to know where that place is exactly. See if you can get yourself invited along on one of those trips."

"Right, Jim."

"Doctor McCoy," Spock says, "wouldn't it make sense that a similar state of affairs prevails at other nearby hospitals?"

"I suppose."

"If I can copy a few other nearby hospitals' records, perhaps you and I can go over them together. With luck, perhaps we can triangulate to find the location."

"Good idea, Spock," Kirk says. Then, seeing McCoy frowning slightly: "Is there a problem with that, Bones?"

"What?" he says, then shakes his head. "No, no, that's a good plan. I was just thinking about something else. Another doctor at the hospital, Helena Mendoza—nice lady, very pretty, very handy in the ER—something's odd about her. She's another don't ask, don't tell doctor like I am at that place—no credentials, but obviously a physician. There are several of us, more than should ever be allowed near patients in any civilized place. Hell, one is too many. But she never goes on those ambulance runs. I saw one of them leaving yesterday, and she ducked into the restroom just long enough to avoid it."

"Hmm... Federation?"

"That's what I'm wondering. I'll have to cozy up to her, try to get her to talk—though I imagine Ocht's reputation for having spies everywhere will put her off talking."

"Still, pleasant enough duty," Kirk says ruefully. "Me, I get to go out on the town with my man Ligo, while Mr. Spock has to program VR characters to say 'fish' when someone says 'How are you?'"



"Mind if I sit down?"

The woman McCoy is standing across from has short red hair, trimmed in bangs in front, and freckles. Her face is pleasant, with wide cheekbones and a rather narrow chin, full lips, slightly up-turned nose, and very intelligent eyes. She has paused with a fork of the pasta-like local dish called *pungee* mid-way to her mouth, some of the green sauce dripping back onto the blue plastic compartmentalized cafeteria tray on the table before her. Her dull green lab coat is open, showing a flowery print blouse. Her name tag says "Mendoza."

She looks at him for a long moment, then shrugs her shoulders and puts the fork in her mouth.

"My names Haliday," he says, "Leonard Haliday."

She points to her name tag. "Helena," she says, filling in the first name.

"You new around here, too?"

She darts a glance at him through her lashes and seems to hunch into herself a little. "No, not really. Why?"

The last is said with a bit of a challenge.

"Just making conversation," he says, putting one hand out in a reassuring gesture. "I'm new, that's all, and thought if you were, too, we might get to know one another, share any secrets about getting along in this place we might find out."

She eats in silence for just long enough that he was beginning to work out another approach. The bit about secrets was clumsy, he'd have to admit that.

"Where are you from?" she asks finally.

"From Lockland," he says. He's had time in the past few days to learn a little bit about Athenian geography. Lockland is a major island to the north and east. It has long been politically affiliated with this continent—enough to share customs and language, but remote enough to hide any minor oddness on his part.

She looks blank, but covers it immediately. "Oh," she says. "That's pretty far away, isn't it?"

"Don't they teach geography where you come from?" he says, chiding and as gently as he can. He wants to see her reaction, but doesn't want to frighten her off.

Her eyes widen minutely. "Sure, I just wasn't a very good student, that's all."

"Sorry, I didn't mean any offense. It's just that we get so many jokes about us, I thought everyone from this continent knew where we were. You must have heard some 'Locklander' jokes?"

"Sure," she says, too quickly. "I used to hear them all the time. You must get awfully tired of them."

"Actually, Helena," McCoy says, lowering his voice and leaning toward her, "if you were from anywhere on this planet you'd know that Locklanders regard jokes at their expense as grounds for a duel. People on this continent don't even admit they exist, at least not to Locklanders."

Her eyes widen now in earnest, and she moves to push herself back from the table.

"Don't," he says, and she freezes. "Don't act suspicious, don't draw attention to us. I'm not one of Ocht's spies."

“Why would I care?” she whispers, but she went white at the mention of the governor’s name.

“You’d care because you’re an escaped Federation citizen.”

“Preposterous. They would be heavily guarded, and as you must be able to see, I’m no fighter.”

“As to that, I’ve recently met a harmless-looking man who could single-handedly wipe out a brigade of armed men with his bare hands. Nothing surprises me anymore. And more to the point, if you were an ordinary Athenian citizen, you wouldn’t know anything at all about the Federation people being held hostage.”

She considers for a moment.

“Suppose for the sake of argument that you’re right—how would I know you were telling the truth about not working for...for the governor? And how do you know that someone who does work for him isn’t listening to us right now?”

“You can’t know if I’m telling the truth. But as to the other, I have a tricorder that says that there are no listening devices nearby.”

“And what if I’m a spy?”

“Then I have made a terrible mistake.”

*And I have a phaser to try to get me out of that mistake,* he adds to himself.

She stares at him for a moment, then sighs.

“It was a stupid idea working here in the first place,” she says, “but I have to eat. Come on, let’s go somewhere we can talk, and you can tell me who you really are and what’s going to happen to me now.”

“We can talk here, and nothing is going to happen to you. It’s safe enough here...safe as anywhere else, anyways. I *am* a doctor, a ship’s doctor from a Federation starship sent here to rescue you.”

She stares at him with an odd mixture of awe and disbelief. “You’re Leonard McCoy, aren’t you?”

“Now how in Sam Hill did you come to that conclusion?” He is annoyed, not to mention a little alarmed, at being so transparent.

“Rumor was that the *Enterprise* was here.” She looks down, embarrassed. “And I’m something of a...a fan of yours, if you will. I’ve read about you since I was a little girl.”

*Oh, great,* he thinks. *Meet a pretty girl, all set up to play knight in shining armor, and she thinks of me as a larger-than-life father figure-cum-geezer.*

*How does Kirk always manage to get girls on these kind of missions, anyways?*



Spock moves around the room in the nightly routine, aiming a tricorder here and there. The others—Kirk, McCoy, and Helena Mendoza—sit in the uncomfortable chairs that are clinging to one another in the drawing room’s center, probably to escape the horrid wallpaper. He finishes, puts the tricorder on the table, and nods.

“All secure, Captain.”

Mendoza is shrunk in on herself, caught up in a maelstrom of emotions, the central one of which is fear. She has reminded herself over and over this long day that she is not the hero type, that she was just a doctor and is now just a fugitive. She appreciates the irony that although her one hope of getting back to the Federation is through these living legends she finds herself thrown together with, they are likely to get her killed in the process.

She appreciates it, but doesn't really *appreciate* it. There is a difference.

Then, too, there's awe. She was barely able to talk when she found out that she was sitting with *the* Dr. McCoy. She is indeed a fan. She has read everything written about and by the man, the good country doctor/scientist/humanitarian/high adventurer. Age difference or not, he could have talked her into just about anything at that moment, especially once he was convinced she was really a Fed and relaxed enough to start laying on his own special brand of Southern charm.

But she'd forgotten the "adventurer" part. Adventurers are best read about, perhaps even observed from a distance. Never followed. That's her belief.

Then he leads her here, to the only two other people in the entire Federation she respects almost as much as McCoy. She actually had not been able to speak for a few minutes.

Awe and horror. *That about sums up my mental state*, she thinks, her eyes darting from one of the men to another.

"Dr. Mendoza," Kirk says, smiling at her for the first time, and she realizes that here's someone even more persuasive, at least to most women, than McCoy. "I'm so glad that McCoy found you! Not only are you the only Federation citizen we've managed to locate so far, but you can hopefully give us information to allow us to find others."

"I'll try, sir," she says, surprised that the tiny voice she hears is hers.

She can tell that he knows she's petrified of them. She's mortified. She's not a little girl, dammit, she's a doctor, and has been one for ten years. They just never told her in medical school how to remain calm and professional when meeting legends while running from a dictator on a strange planet. She must write the curriculum committee a stern letter when this is all over. She almost giggles at the thought, but has a feeling that if she does, she might not stop laughing soon.

He pats her shoulder, then squeezes it reassuringly. *It's all right*, he seems to be telling her, *we'll take care of you*.

He drops his hand and turns to Spock, giving her time to collect herself. "Any luck?"

"Indeed, Captain. I now have the location of several of the vacated government laboratories, thanks to a bug in a government computer's security, along with a list of equipment remaining at the sites."

"Excellent!"

"Now we know where the labs are," McCoy says, "and Helena here can tell us where some of the citizens are, what are we going to do? Storm them, just the four of us?"

"Bones, Bones, Bones," Kirk chides. "Have you no faith?"

He puts a hand in his garish coat as if reaching for a gun and mimics a bad gangster movie accent: "Me and de boys, see, we got a date to sell some hot iron to the undergroun' tonight."

McCoy shakes his head, and Spock raises an eyebrow. Mendoza just gapes.

# Chapter Twenty-One

Ligo and Kirk are alone in a warehouse in the old industrial section of the city. On their way here in Ligo's car, they passed row after deserted row of identical warehouses. Only their various patterns of decay allowed them to be told apart. It was like driving through a rat-infested ghost town, though here, Kirk imagined, the rats were humans like Ligo and himself, lone scurrying creatures bent on their own ends.

At least, Kirk hopes they are alone. The warehouse is huge, even bigger than *Enterprise*'s shuttle bay. And much, much more cluttered and run down. There are tall stacks of boxes and crates on pallets on all sides, some of them reaching almost to the ceiling, dimly visible overhead in the gloom. There are no windows. He is just as glad, since that means that they can allow themselves at least a little light. A feeble yellow glow, from a row of bare bulbs trying desultorily to keep the darkness at bay, throws most of the warehouse into shadow.

He is on edge, but cannot afford to show it. It could be any of a number of kinds of traps: Ocht's people, a rival gang, the underground itself, maybe someone he hasn't even thought of.

Ligo, on the other hand, is the soul of calm, leaning in his gangster rags against a grimy crate and cleaning his fingernails with a switchblade.

"Relax, old man," Ligo smirks. "They'll be here."

"Who's worried, sonny?" Kirk forces himself to relax a little. Or at least become less tense. "I was doing this sort of thing when you were still in diapers."

He has to struggle to keep from touching the phaser tucked into his waistband. He hopes it won't come to a firefight. But if it does, he intends to see that he wins.

Ligo has taken to giving Kirk what he undoubtedly considers a good-natured hard time. Kirk does his best to play along. Wouldn't do to let the little toad see what he really thinks of him.



"Keep your hands where we can see them!" The voice comes from Kirk's right, just behind the first line of crates. Before he is even tempted to do anything foolish, slapping sounds come from at least six locations all around them.

He is encouraged. If this is the underground, they're smarter than he had hoped. They nicely and efficiently let them know they are surrounded.

The leader steps from around the crates. She is a short, square woman, college-aged, with an oddly hard face. Odd, that is, because she looks like someone drew hard lines over a face that was more naturally given to laughing.

Which is probably the case, he reflects. Nothing like getting caught in a rebellion to make you grow up—and old—really fast.

"You Ligo?" she asks. Her voice is hard, like her face. She almost barks at them. She is obviously used to giving orders.

"Yeah," Ligo says, making a show of casually putting his switchblade away. "And you are...?"

"A customer," she says. "You have the merchandise?"

Ligo nods to Kirk. He slowly pulls a tarpaulin off the box at his feet, opens it to reveal a row of gleaming automatic projectile weapons.

“You got the cash?”

“Right here.” She tosses a canvas bag at Ligo’s feet. “Now where are the *rest* of the guns?”

“You know,” Ligo says, “prices have a way of going up suddenly—unanticipated business expenses, things like that. I figure what’s in here”—he toes the bag—“is about right for half of what you asked for.”

*The slimy little bugger!* Kirk thinks, figuring firing lines, timing to get to his phaser, possible cover. *What’s he trying to do, get us killed?* She doesn’t look like the type who’d take double-crossing well.

She takes two steps toward Ligo, and suddenly there’s a pair of nunchuks in her hand. She doesn’t do anything as showy as swinging them around. She simply flips her wrist, and one of the sticks is tucked under her arm, the other straight up in her hand. Kirk has played with ’chuks before. That position preserves maximum flexibility.

“Don’t screw with me, little man,” she growls. “A deal’s a deal, even with vermin like you. You back out now, I’ll mess you and Pops here up good, and so quietly no one outside the building will know.”

“You do that,” Ligo says, reasonably enough, “and where you gonna get guns next time?”

“Don’t screw with me,” she repeats, taking another step towards him. “There are plenty of thugs out there with guns for sale. Ridding the world you two wouldn’t keep them from selling to me.”

“Take her out, Josie!” Ligo says, and dives for cover.

*What are you, nuts?* Kirk thinks. He hasn’t fought someone with those damned things since the Academy, and then he ended up with his arm in a cast for two weeks. Better just to stun as many as he can... But she’s too close now for him to reach for the phaser.

The ’chuk pops out from under her arm and swings toward his head as a blur, but he’s no longer there. He has done something he hasn’t tried in years, a backflip during a fight.

He lands on his rear and quickly scrambles to his feet, but at least only his dignity is hurt.

He is actually less worried about the deadly young woman in front of him than what Ligo is up to. The only way he can be sure that taking such a chance will work is if he’s got back-up from his gang. Scuffling sounds from the stacks seem to confirm that.

They also serve to distract Miss Death long enough for him to grab a board, absorb the momentum of her nunchuks, then disarm her. She is still staring open-mouthed at him when he grabs her and flings her to the floor between some crates, with him on top of her.

“Would you settle down,” he hisses as she struggles to throw him off, “before I hit you with your own ’chuks?” She ceases. “Good. Now stay here and keep your head down. I’m one of the good guys. A friend said to tell you I was his confederate.”

She stares at him as if he had metamorphized into some exotic creature, which he supposed he had to her eyes. That was a code phrase from Flynn’s files to identify a Federation operative

to those underground cells that had been contacted by Federation spies. Apparently Ms. Bloodthirsty's is one of them.

He draws his phaser—gaining even more respect in her eyes, he sees—and makes his way as quietly as possible down the nearest aisle toward the wall, avoiding the sounds of a fight in progress to his left. At the wall, he works his way along to a ladder he saw earlier that looked like a permanent part of the structure. Hoping that no one is looking up, he climbs the rickety wooden rungs and steps gingerly out onto a catwalk at the top.

From here, he has a good view of the melee, or what's left of it. There were nine others in the cell, and of these, four are still fighting. Two of the others are on the ground, one of whom looks like she might be dead, judging by the amount of blood he sees spreading from her head. The other two are being held by some of Ligo's goons. Several goons are on the ground as well, he is pleased to see.

He spots McCoy and Spock entering the building through the side doors. Pity he had no time to signal them, or else much pain could have been avoided.

They all look up when they hear the whine of his phaser, then wildly cast about as two more join it. Good guys and bad, everyone who is armed and standing tries to take aim at him. He gives them no chance. He's been at this too long to worry about such a paltry number of targets trying to kill him, especially since none of them have modern weaponry. Within the space of a breath, the only people conscious in the warehouse are his people and Mademoiselle Le Morte.

She's waiting for him at the bottom of the ladder, cradling one of the projectile weapons Ligo brought.

“You planning on using that thing on me?” he asks, keeping his phaser out as he climbs down.

Hastily, she lowers it. “No,” she says, her voice slightly unsteady. “What did you say to me earlier?”

“You heard me. I’m from the Federation.”

She looks around at the silent warehouse as he jumps to the floor by her.

“What now?” she asks, shaking her head.

“First, we separate the good guys from the baddies, tie up the latter, and try to wake up the former. One of my friends,” he gestures toward where he last saw McCoy, “is a doctor, and there’s another one nearby. Some of your people look like they could use one. Then we get the hell out of here and go plan strategy somewhere.” He sticks his phaser in the waistband of his trousers. “Before that, though, what’s your name?”

“Uh, call me Kelly Green.”

“Cute,” he says, shaking his head. “Well, Ms. Green, I’m tired of these spy games. You can call me whatever you like—except ‘Pops’—but my *name* is Jim Kirk.”

He extends his hand, and, with a dawning look of wonder, she takes it.



It is a rather ugly building, square unadorned windows staring back from plain dun stone walls. It looks like several of the other classroom buildings in this part of Athena U.’s enormous

campus, ones that were put up hastily, with no time for architectural niceties, during one of the university's early growth spurts.

"You sure that's it, Spock?" McCoy whispers.

The three Starfleet officers are crouched in a clump of purplish shrubbery huddling against a building across the street from the target. All of the resistance cell's members that are able are spread out around the lab, hiding from the occasional security patrol and awaiting Kirk's signal. Helena is back at the group's safehouse tending to the two cell members who were the most severely wounded in last night's fight. The woman who had been bleeding survived, but only just.

"Of course, Doctor," Spock says, sounding faintly offended. He studies his tricorder, pointed at the target. "There is good security in that building. Were I not jamming the external sensors, we would at the moment be showing up on someone's screen inside."

"How many people inside, Spock?"

"Unknown, Captain. Their security system, by design or accident, is jamming *my* sensors, at least at the level I dare use them. At least five. That many are apparent from the occasional lapses in their security net."

"Okay, then. We'll have to wing it. Give the signal."

From several locations around the building, young men and women suddenly appear. The observers inside the lab would be able to see their denim jeans and cotton shirts, student uniforms for several hundred years, and their signs tacked up on poles in their hands. "No Death Merchants At Athena!" one sign screams in red dripping letters, while another commands "Federation Warmongers Go Home!" The students gather into several clumps around the mirrored windows to taunt those inside.

Kirk fervently hopes that Kelly is right, that University security does not fire on peaceful protestors, or even ones that are a little unruly. Terrible for PR. The students are betting too much on that, especially now that Ocht has broken with the Federation. But he doesn't have a better plan, nor can he spare time to worry about it now.

One of the students throws a rock at a window; it bounces off harmlessly. Other students follow suit, yelling epithets at those inside. Kelly, as arranged, throws a rock at the security camera facing the three of them. Just as it hits, Kirk takes out the camera with his phaser. Hopefully, the guards will think it was a lucky hit.

Silently, the three run for the building, toward the only side without windows. He looks to make sure the other two are ready, then nods. Three phasers on their highest setting open a truck-sized hole in the wall. They duck through, avoiding the white-hot edges of the hole, and throw themselves to the floor.

Needless. There is no one in the room, a large lab. At least, there is no one there now. Judging from the mess, had there been anyone there, they were now only so much vapor.

Kirk punches the button on his communicator that will signal the students to scatter. If the guards don't know something more than a demonstration is going on now, they will momentarily.

He motions for the others to adjust their phasers, and they spread out through the building.

Ten minutes later, they have secured the lab. Six unconscious security guards are piled in a heap by the new ad hoc entryway. Kirk signals the students to come drag them out and away from the building, then goes in search of Spock.

He finds him in an electronics clean room turning what looks like a phaser prototype over in his hands.

“And that would be...?”

“Apparently a hand-held Javelin.” He raises an eyebrow. “From what I see, truly an impressive piece of work. Mr. Scott will be most envious that I have seen one.”

“Worth taking?”

“I would advise against it, Captain. As much as we need the firepower, this is a prototype and, hence, unreliable. We also should not risk these falling into unfriendly hands.”

“Who’s unfriendlier than Ocht?”

“Point taken, Captain.”

“But you’re right, Mr. Spock, we leave them here. Rig them to overload and let’s get out of here.”

Back outside, the three huddle again, this time behind bushes significantly farther away. The students have scattered into the campus, perfect camouflage for them, and the stunned guards have been dragged off a safe distance. Security vehicles are converging on the lab now. It’s barely been ten minutes since the “protest” began. Very efficient security indeed.

Just as the first of the vehicles pulls up, siren wailing, the building flies apart with a monumental *whump*. Bits of stone shrapnel whiz around them even at this distance. The armored security vehicles look like tin cans that have been put in a blender.

Of the lab, nothing remains.

“Impressive, Mr. Spock.”

“Indeed, Captain. I’m not sure I would want one of those on the ship.”

❖

Back at the safehouse, there is much jubilation. This cell has been active in the rebellion, but this is the first time they have attacked such an important target, and in broad daylight. Even the students who had been reluctant to accept Kirk and the others now treat them with deference approaching reverence.

Spock sits quietly in the corner going over the equipment that McCoy and he had managed to pick up in the raid. Several standard phasers—courtesy of the guards—and some plastique that had been at the lab for reasons unknown was about the extent of it. Kirk would have to organize phaser lessons for the students so that they didn’t disintegrate one another.

Helena Mendoza has spent the evening hovering around McCoy. She was so relieved to see him that when he arrived safely, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He didn’t seem to mind.

Kirk smiles, watching the two of them chatting now as they examine the young woman Kirk thought was dead the other night. She has a nasty skull fracture and is still unconscious, but

McCoy insists that she will be all right without risking taking her to a hospital. McCoy, the trained observer, seems to be oblivious to the admiring glances Helena keeps sending his way.

*Good for him*, Kirk thinks, not without a twinge of envy.

Recently, it's all just seemed too much of a bother to him. He seldom encounters single women his own age, and when he does, they are likely to be fellow Starfleet captains. Starfleet in these enlightened times doesn't mind a fling between its officers unless one immediately commands the other, but Kirk knows from bitter experience that the temperaments of two starship captains do not make a good match. And more and more, though he finds them attractive—and, comfortingly, vice versa—Younger women seem of another species. He has nothing in common with them, and the things they think are important seem to him to hold little value.

He glances at the so-called "Kelly Green" and sees her hurriedly look away, blushing. He could probably have any woman in the room, excluding perhaps the good doctor's companion, with little trouble. Twenty years ago, hell, ten years ago, he would have given it a try with one of them. Now...

Well, now he'd just like to take a nap somewhere without being bothered.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

It is night. Kirk has spent most of the day drilling the students on tactics and using phasers. That, and telling them over and over again not to get cocky. They might have bloodied Ocht's nose, but it was a minor bleed, and one that would make him more dangerous, not less. And the Federation citizens were sure to be more heavily guarded than the deserted lab, in any case.

The three of them again are hiding out of sight, this time behind a dumpster across a dark street from a featureless gray building. Helena had wanted to come with them—with McCoy, really—but she had finally been convinced to stay once again with the injured. And to prepare to take care of injuries from this night's work.

A street light overhead makes a half-hearted attempt to illuminate the pavement, but only succeeds in making the damp concrete look slick and slimy. Wafts of decay reach their noses occasionally, borne by sluggish puffs of air that ooze up the street.

“You sure this is the place, Jim?” McCoy looks dubious. Spock glances at him, one eyebrow raised. “Okay, okay, so Helena said this is where they were holding her.”

“According to Flynn's files, this is one of the shield generator stations for the city,” Kirk says. “Makes sense they'd hold the hostages here—protection from transporters, and it's bound to have good security anyway. The extra guards wouldn't draw anyone's attention.”

“We must also get inside long enough for me to determine how to disable the generator when the ships return,” Spock says.

“Well, let's go,” McCoy says. “Waiting just makes me cranky.”

“You undoubtedly wait far too often, Doctor,” Spock says drily, “for far too long.”

McCoy grunts, but otherwise does not respond.



They are again dressed in the clothes they took from Ocht's people the night of the beam-down. Keeping under cover, they make their way around the building to the rear and walk boldly up the street toward the shield generator.

“Halt!” a gruff voice calls from the rickety guard shack just inside a gleaming field-reinforced fence. “Step forward and identify yourselves.”

McCoy and Spock, dressed in the uniform of planetary security, haul Kirk into the light. Spock has a blood-stained rag around his head, hiding his ears.

“Me and Smiley here,” McCoy says, gesturing toward Spock with his head, “were going into town for a couple of drinks—our night off, you know?—when we saw this guy snooping around back. There were some others with him, but they scattered and got away. Thought we'd better drop him off here.”

“Okay, just stay right there.” The voice is still suspicious. “Hold him up straighter so the computer can identify him.”

There is a pause.

“Good lord,” the voice says, “the governor himself will give us all medals! The computer says you’ve got yourself Captain Kirk of the starship *Enterprise*. The guv is pretty anxious to meet that guy. Hang on, let me open the gate. Bring him in here.”

A stocky, rough-hewn man comes out and places his palm on a panel by the gate. They push through as it clicks open. McCoy glances inside the shack on the way past: no one there, just a chair, computer screen, and some white foam coffee cups. He nods to the others.

“So,” the guard sneers into Kirk’s face, “you’re the great unh..!” He slumps.

Spock removes his hand from the man’s shoulder and catches him as he falls.

“I wish I knew how you do that, Spock,” Kirk says.

“I *have* tried to teach you, Captain,” he replies with some weariness.

“Why don’t you two discuss technique another time,” McCoy says. “Let’s get him inside!”

McCoy and Spock each put one of the man’s arms around their shoulders and walk him toward the shack. The guard’s legs move clumsily, like a marionette’s, but it might fool a computer-based watchdog, if the security is that sophisticated.

After an eternity, they are inside. Spock immediately moves to the computer console, runs his tricorder over it, then, apparently satisfied, sits in the chair. He begins to touch virtual buttons as they appear on the smooth control panel.

“Well, Spock?” Kirk asks impatiently after a minute, turning briefly from his vigil by the door.

“Unfortunately, this is solely a security system, completely isolated from the planetary net. A wise precaution. I cannot glean any additional information from here.”

“Can you disarm the building’s automated security from here?”

“Done,” he says, rising.

“Jim,” McCoy says, putting a hand on Kirk’s arm as he is about to leave the shack. “This could be a trap. Doesn’t it seem like this has been too easy?”

“I know, Bones,” he replies. “I know. But we’ve got to get the Federation people out of that building before they move them after our little adventure at the lab, and I’m fresh out of alternative plans. Signal the others,” he says to Spock.

The door to the building is obvious. In fact, it is the only feature visible in the building’s smooth flank. It is massive, easily large enough to admit a shuttlecraft, were one of a mind to fly in.

In the darkness around them, Kirk can hear the scuffling of the students as they take up their positions. As they examine the door, the others sidle up to them, then stand around looking nervous.

As obvious as the door is, there seems to be no way to open it from outside. Kirk has the irrational urge to yell “friend” at it, as memories of a similar scene from a book he read years ago springs to mind. He just hopes that Spock is quicker on the uptake than Gandalf was.

Something in the dim light catches his eye. What he first took to be the faint outlines of structural members are in reality the edges of a smaller door within the door. There is a slight raised area to the right that slides aside at Spock’s touch to reveal a small control panel.

"Spock and I will go first, then the rest of you. Bones, you stay out here and stand watch. There are bound to be guards on patrol."

"Always a bridesmaid," the doctor mutters. "Just be quick about it, okay? I don't like standing out here practically wearing a 'shoot me' sign."

The door hisses open onto a deeper darkness. The group step through, and the door shuts again behind them, leaving McCoy alone in the large fenced-in yard outside the building.

*At least, he thinks, jumping as he hears a metallic pop to his left, I hope I'm alone.*



The space around them feels cavernous. They don't dare use their lights. As their eyes adjust to the trace of light present, they realize they are on a catwalk, though a huge one. As wide as the larger door behind them, it stretches off in front of them toward the guts of the building. Branches seem to go off to each side along the walls. Kirk can see nothing as he looks over the rails.

Toward the center of the building is the source of the light: the shield generator, illuminated by faint blue light playing around it that seems to come from the air itself. A thick conduit, easily as large itself as a good-sized building, is faintly visible leaving the top of the generator on its way up to spread out into the emitter net on the building's roof. A deep hum can be heard as well as felt through their boots.

"Okay," he whispers. "Spread out. Anyone finding the Federation people, signal. Spock, go have a look at the generator. Anyone see any of Ocht's people, stun them immediately."

Light crashes around them, so bright it's almost like a physical presence. They squint and shield their eyes with hands not holding phasers, looking for signs of their tormenters.

"Don't be foolish." The voice came from above, deep and smooth, utterly confident. "Drop your weapons. As you can see, we've been expecting you."

There are at least ten armored individuals on a second catwalk a few meters overhead, weapons trained on the hapless group pinned by the light. Their leader, or at least their spokesman, is an arrogant, Aryan-looking youngish man, unarmored and unarmed as far as Kirk can see. The others seem to shrink back slightly from him. Something about his eyes, something feral, and in his movements, is familiar, but Kirk can't quite put his finger on it.

"An augment," Spock says quietly, faint surprise in his voice.

The man throws back his head and laughs, an altogether unpleasant sound.

"Yes indeed, Mr..." He glances at a computer screen at his wrist. "Spock. That must mean the other augment we've run into is a friend of yours."

Kirk is startled, but strives mightily not to show it, not to glance at Spock. Could Flynn have survived the crash? And, if so, what is he doing? Are there indeed two groups from *Enterprise* here, possibly working at cross-purposes?

*Not that this group is likely to be doing anything productive for a while*, he ruefully admits to himself.

"But you'll tell us everything you know," the augment continues. He leaps over the rail, taking the five meter drop as easily as stepping off a curb.

Kirk motions for the students not to do anything. They may not know what this person is capable of, even unarmed, but he remembers all too well the recording of Flynn's fight with the *Enterprise* crewmen.

Too late. The nearest student makes the mistake of trying to bring his phaser to bear. The augment's arm shoots out, seeming to lightly flick the student's face. There is a sickening crack, and he flies over the catwalk to thud into the floor far below.

“Sooner or later,” the man says as if nothing had happened, “you’ll tell Governor Ocht whatever he wants to know. You’ll be even more valuable to him than our pet scientists and engineers, I’ll wager. You didn’t actually think they’d still be here, did you? The Romulans and Klingons will fall all over each other bidding for the right to own—or at least, kill—the great James Kirk.”

He motions for the others, now coming down the ladders, to manacle Kirk, Spock, and the obviously shocked students.

“Now if you’ll excuse me, gentlemen,” he says, “I will leave you for a while. I have a small matter to attend to outside.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Armed men and women pass within arms' reach of where he huddles, and McCoy tries to pull back even more into the pile of metal tailings, leftovers from some milling operation. If he could, he would try to think like a piece of metal. The metal shards are pricking him in a hundred places, and his borrowed uniform has begun to rub him raw in the most intimate locations, but these are the least of his worries. It's only a matter of time, he knows, before someone comes along with a tricorder.

It's been only a few minutes since the guards spewed from the building. Some sixth sense seemed to warn him that the people opening the door were not Kirk and Spock. Had he not listened, had he not bolted for cover, they would have seized him immediately.

He knows he has to make his move soon, or not at all. No use going inside for the other two; he'll do them no good getting captured, too. And his hand phaser seems pitiful armament indeed against all the armored figures.

*Damn it, he thinks, I wish one of them was out here and I was in there. They'd know what to do—I'm a doctor, not James Bond.*

When the guards turn the corner, he takes a deep breath and is off and running. He is not in as good of shape as he once was, but he nonetheless covers the ground at an impressive speed, then leaps high and hits the electrified fence well off the ground, praying that it is just a hunk of metal and nothing fancier. It is. Unless he touches something that grounds him, he is safe on the fence, like a bird on a high-tension wire. Some of the better fences weave ground wires among the others, where someone climbing them is sure to be fried. He says a silent prayer of thanksgiving for whatever budget cut led to them buying the cheaper model.

He scrambles up and over, then jumps well away, almost spraining his ankle in the process. Then he is gone into the shadows toward downtown.

Into the shadows behind him silently plunges the young, blond-haired man from inside, carefully keeping a respectable distance between himself and the doctor. It is probably just as well that no one is present to glimpse his chilling grin.



McCoy usually is confident, a confidence borne of good training and exceptional skill. Ask anyone who has ever watched him operate. In his other role, as Starfleet officer, he is equally self-assured, as befits the company he keeps.

Now, however, he finds himself dithering. He called Helena from a public phone and gave her the code signal meaning "dissolve the cell," which was a laugh, really. The cell had been effectively dissolved by the armed people back at the shield generator. By now, she will gotten her charges out of the house, and the injured remnants of the cell will go to ground. Of Helena, he knows not where she will go.

He can't decide whether to go to the safehouse to try to find her, or to keep away. He knows what makes sense—he could lead someone right to her and the others. But he is afraid that if he doesn't find her now, he may never find her again. Or, worse, that something might happen to

her. He has only known her for couple of days, but already she is, he is forced to admit, special to him.

*Probably that whole groupie thing she has going*, he chides himself. *You old fool. You think Kirk is the only one whose ego gets a boost from a pretty young thing?*

He shakes his head and gives up the idea of doing some damn fool hero stunt. She'll be fine, or she won't. He'll see her again, or he won't. More importantly, he has to find some way to free his friends, carry on the mission.

His one hope is that there are other cells in this city that can help him. It is a vague, but powerful hope. Besides, it is the only alternative available to him at the moment. Though he has his communicator, there is little chance that there are friendly ships in orbit, and even if there are, they will undoubtedly be so busy with Ocht's orbital defenses or his little Klingon and Romulan friends that they won't be able to drop their shields to beam him up.

So he moves on toward downtown, with only a wisp of a plan to contact the resistance or find some remnant of Flynn's spy network. Nothing is clear. Exhaustion clouds his mind.

He is surprised to find himself in Old Town. He has been wandering aimlessly for—he sees with surprise—almost two hours. Every now and then as he walks, he can see through the corridors of squalid buildings lining the streets the spires of the university rising into the night sky.

Around him slither the underclass of Athena, the part of the picture not seen in advertisements for the university. Some are wandering in confusion, probably intoxicated on alcohol or some local drug, he figures. They have the gaunt, desperate, yet vacuous expression he has seen on a dozen worlds, though seldom on a Federation planet. Others stand and watch, predators, alert and opportunistic. To be weak here is to be prey.

Will his stolen tunic protect him from the sharks, or will the sight of a lone security officer, even armed, tempt the lurkers? He keeps his hand near his phaser and walks on, trying to look tough.

Around him, the tide of the night parts momentarily as he distracts the actors in a drug deal, interrupts the gropings and faux cries of a prostitute and her customer, then the waters settle back, and he passes, leaving not a ripple on the face of the night.



After a while, he nears a section of town less seedy than what he has seen so far. It seems to be a center of government, though for the city, the region, or even for the planet, he doesn't know. Old, ostentatious marble buildings rise up suddenly amidst the street's grime, fluted columns supporting green copper roofs and gilded domes.

Here, the denizens of the night are fewer. Soon they disappear altogether. The streets are deserted.

But wait—was that movement he saw ahead, someone or several someones darting around a corner? Instinctively, he ducks behind a column to get out of view.

It probably saves his life. Without warning, the building across the street explodes into head-sized chunks of masonry, barely behind an actinic flash and palpable roar. The blast's hot breath

knocks him sprawling, stones dropping around him like hail. For one irrational moment, he thinks that somehow the explosion and his flight from Ocht's people are linked. But then, few people try to kill a lone man by blowing up the buildings around him. Not very cost-effective.

He picks himself up off the rubble-strewn steps of the building and tries to decide what to do next. He retreats deeper into the recesses between the columns, hoping that *this* building, too, will not suddenly decide that what its neighbor across the street did was a good idea and follow suit, like some gigantic mine exploding in response to his presence.

Something nags at his mind. For a split second, just as the building across the street spectacularly ceased to exist as a building *per se*, the flash illuminated what seemed to be a figure *behind* him, creeping up the way he came. It could have been an illusion; the best time to make calm observations is not necessarily during an explosion. Or it could have been another of the night's creatures, pursuing its own ends and unaware of the Federation man ahead of it. Or even thinking of jumping him. But, thinking back, McCoy thinks the person looked out of place. Clean-cut, blond, in a garment that could easily have been a uniform.

A mysterious figure behind him, others ahead, exploding buildings, and sirens beginning to be heard off in the distance. *No job for a country doctor*, he observes to himself. *Gotta retire one of these days, go back to Georgia*. Buildings are more substantial there, for one thing.

Hoping what he is doing is the right thing, he strikes out toward where he saw—or thought he did, anyway—the figures ahead of him, keeping the corner of the building between himself and his pursuer. At least the ones ahead aren't out to get him. Yet. And they are blowing up pieces of Ocht's property, which seems a hopeful sign.

Upon gaining the street, he runs as silently as he can. After what seems like hours, he hears a faint movement ahead. He can't seem to catch up; he isn't really sure that he wants to, but can think of nothing better to do. But when the sounds suddenly stop, he slows reflexively to a walk, then a slow walk, then he stops, hoping to hear something again from in front of him.

Strong hands grip him from behind, and a harsh voice says in his ear, "One sound and you're a dead man!" He is roughly twisted around to face his captor.

"Montenegro?" he asks incredulously. "I thought you were dead!"

She looks different somehow, but it's still recognizably her. She is thinner; no, that's not right—*leaner*, more muscular. Prettier, too. She seems as surprised as he feels.

"McCoy!" she hisses. "You're about the last person I'd have expected to show up wearing Ocht's colors. Trying your hand at the spy business, are you?" She releases him and looks around quickly. "You alone?"

"I am, now," he says. "Jim and Spock beamed down with me from a defsat we captured, but they were caught. I got away and came looking for help. Did you blow up that building?"

She grins viciously. "Yeah, that was fun."

She giggles, and a cold chill spreads down his spine. Suddenly he feels lucky she didn't kill him out of hand. Just for fun.

"We're trying to track down the Federation people. That building was a central records repository. We raided it for information, but thought we might as well give Ocht a little hot-foot

while we're at it, throw a little confusion into things. Won't really hurt him, more's the pity. I'm sure he has backups and mirror sites all over the planet.

"Come on, let's hustle it up and find the others before the cops—the real cops, that is," she says, flicking a medal pinned to his borrowed uniform, "get here." She gives him a rough push that he assumes was meant to be comradely, but that nearly topples him.

The "others" are as scruffy-looking a group as McCoy has ever seen. A handful of very young men and women come out of their hiding spot, an ill-conceived and poorly-executed sculpture garden, as they approach. They emerge almost timidly, eyes wide, to stare at him.

*These are the ones I'm going to have to rely on for help?* he thinks with a sinking feeling. *Did we get the only reasonable cell on the planet?*

He shares a look with Montenegro, who shrugs half in apology for the group, half in amused commiseration.



"Come on," one of them whines, "let's get out of here! The cops are almost here, we'll be caught!"

"Okay, okay," Montenegro says, "we're going, don't soil yourself."

"You're going nowhere," an authoritative voice says from behind them. McCoy and Montenegro whirl as one, she blurring into a fighting crouch.

Facing them is a blond-haired giant, what McCoy had always thought Thor might look like.

"One of your friends?" Montenegro growls accusingly.

"He's been following me, I think," admits McCoy.

"Great. Led him right to us. Thanks a lot."

"Now, now," the man says with an evil-sounding laugh, "mustn't bicker. We'd have found you anyway. Pretty amateurish, blowing up buildings. Not the way to stay unobtrusive."

He steps closer. McCoy feels Montenegro tense beside him, but nothing happens. The man is carrying a phaser, almost carelessly, but still it is trained on them all. A light materializes in his other hand. He shines it on McCoy, then on Montenegro.

He does a double-take, then squints at her for a long minute.

"Well, well!" he says, sounding pleased. "What have we here? I'll be damned if it isn't old Juliesse! Different-looking, but you can't fool me. You're supposed to be dead, you know that?"

Montenegro shields her eyes with her hand and studies him in turn for a moment, then slumps a bit.

"Of all the gin joints..." she says. "Stefan. I should have known I'd see you again."

"Yep, it's me. Don't even think about jumping me, Jule; I was always more than a match for you, and I'm armed. I don't want to have to kill you just yet."

McCoy can stand it no longer.

"'Juliesse?'" he asks. "You know this person?"

"I'm sorry, Doctor," she says tiredly. She seems to have let some or all of the changes subside, at least for the moment, as if she is resigned to whatever fate and this man have in store

for them. “This...person...is Stefan Müllendorf, a...an acquaintance of mine from when I lived here. You might say we grew up together.”

“Yeah.” He leers at her. “Something like that, eh, Jule? Too bad you came back. They’ll kill you—after they find out all you know, of course. We could have had some fun, just like old times. Maybe kill off some of these student ‘revolutionaries’ slowly, just for laughs.”

The objects of his derision try to shrink back further into the building they are standing against.

“So *you’re* the augment we’ve heard about that’s on planet,” he continues. “How the hell did you kill Sareth? She’s a newer model than either of us. And what brings you back? Miss me?” He leers at her.

She doesn’t get a chance to answer. Something flashes through the air, sparkling briefly in the light. Müllendorf sees it and steps back with breathtaking speed. McCoy could swear he heard a slight *pop* from displaced air. The knife, possibly meant for his vulnerable midsection, instead impales his forearm. Howling in pain, he is forced to drop the phaser, which Montenegro, fully triggered again, scoops up. Before she can aim, he has removed the knife and vanished into the darkness.

“Monty, get these people out of here,” someone shouts from the direction from where the knife came. “I’ll take care of our augmented friend.”

“Flynn!” McCoy says, then is grabbed and dragged away by Montenegro.

“That one’s dangerous, Flynn,” she shouts over her shoulder. “Be careful you don’t get yourself killed!”



The atmosphere pervading the cell’s new safehouse, a dingy warehouse, is not exactly one of exultation, McCoy thinks. Students sit nervously about on crates and boxes, looking like they are poised to flee should Müllendorf suddenly barge through the door.

McCoy, too, is wondering when that will happen.

It has been over an hour since Flynn went in pursuit of the other augment. There has been no word on the outcome of the fight, if there was one. One thing they all noticed—Müllendorf is a monster of a man, much taller and bigger than Flynn, with plenty of extra brawn to serve as grist for his augmentation. Given an augment’s ability to heal, it is doubtful that even his injured arm significantly evened the odds.

Montenegro sits with the others, watching the door and distractedly turning her phaser over and over in her hands. Frowning, she answers McCoy’s questions with monosyllables. Yes, she and Stefan had once been friends. No, she doesn’t know if Flynn stands a chance, she doesn’t think so. Yes, Stefan and she *had* been lovers, now would he please shut the hell up and leave her alone?

He finally gives up and leans back against a sack of what feels like potatoes to wait for whatever happens.

*Grab rest when you can*, that’s one of the things he learned in med school, and it hasn’t failed him since. His adventures with Jim Kirk have never given him reason to forget it.

There is a knock at the door—two taps, a pause, two more, a pause, then three. Montenegro is on her feet instantly and beside the door, fully triggered. She motions to a girl sitting close by to open the door. Approaching the door as if it were a venomous snake, she complies.

Flynn staggers into the room and collapses in a heap on a pile of rags. His clothes are torn and dirty and he is bloody in several places. He carries his left arm as if it might be broken.

“Stefan...?” Montenegro asks. Her face shows worry, though for whom, McCoy wouldn’t bet.

“Thanks for your touching concern, Monty,” Flynn says, the sarcasm in his voice ragged from pain. “He’s dead. Finally. I thought he was going to kill me for a while there. What a brute!”

Montenegro accepts the news—and the rebuke—without changing expression. “How did you manage to beat him?”

“The tricks of old age beat the strength of youth any time,” he manages to grate out, “and don’t you forget it.”

To McCoy, it sounds like a warning. Flynn chuckles weakly, but then starts coughing, a wet yet rasping sound that goes on entirely too long, in McCoy’s opinion.

“Let me take a look at you,” he says.

Flynn starts to wave him off, then, as if even that is too much effort, collapses back against the rags again and lets McCoy poke around on his chest and arm.

“You’ve got some broken ribs, your arm is broken in two places, and God only knows how much internal bleeding you have. One lung punctured for sure. We’ve got to get you to a hospital.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Flynn says. “I’ll heal. I’m good at that. Besides, know any hospital that wouldn’t turn is in?”

“Fine,” McCoy says gruffly. “It’s your funeral.”

“So,” Montenegro persists, “how’d you do it?”

“He was a *lot* stronger than me and about as quick. But you were apparently never given some of the the abilities my creators thought would be fun. Just as he was about to pound my head into a wall, I had the cells in my lungs create some phosgene gas. Not very original, and easily countered, but it was all I could think of given the circumstances. I breathed it at him and it slowed him down long enough for me to rip his throat out. The son of a bitch still beat the hell out of me, even while he was dying.

“Two of Ocht’s augments down. Wonder how many more I have to kill?”

McCoy wonders if Montenegro is included in that number. From her face, she is wondering the same thing.



Some time later, the coded knock sounds again at the door, startling McCoy. Montenegro answers it, phaser in hand. Three *Enterprise* crewmen flow in like fog from the night and the door quickly shuts behind them.

“Doctor McCoy!” Chekhov says, smiling broadly. Then the smile fades. “But why are you here?”

“And what happened to you?” O’Connor says to Flynn, teasingly but with real concern. “You look like the loser in a catfight.”

“It’s a long story...” McCoy and Flynn say together. They glance at each other and chuckle. Flynn coughs again, then collapses back onto the rags where he is lying, motioning for McCoy to go first.

“It’s a long story,” he repeats. He tells them about the attack on the defsat and boarding it, finding the cell, the successful and the unsuccessful raids. “Spock and the captain were captured. I got away. Actually, I guess I was allowed to escape. I was followed by one of Ocht’s men. Flynn killed him.”

“The captain?” O’Connor says. “Captured?”

“What are we going to do?” Chekhov asks miserably, to no one in particular.

“We’ll do nothing for a while,” Flynn answers, propping himself back up. “I need to heal, and I need to think a bit about what our next move should be. We still have a mission to accomplish.”

“But the captain...”

“...would say the same thing, were he here,” Flynn finishes for him, “and you know that. We’ll rescue him if we can.”

LaRue is still staring at Flynn in open-mouthed wonder. “One of Ocht’s men did that to you?”

“He was an augment,” McCoy says.

“Oh. Good lord, how many of those bastards are there? No offense, Monty,” he quickly adds.

“Right,” she drawls, glaring at him from where she is trying to tend Flynn’s wounds. O’Connor also gravitates to Flynn and stands watching.

Montenegro is more persistent than McCoy. But all any of them can do, except for Flynn himself, is to treat the scrapes and cuts. Without his instruments, McCoy can do nothing about the internal injuries and breaks. After splinting the arm as best he could, he left the augments to lick each other’s wounds.

*Rough life, though*, he thinks, watching the two women hover around Flynn. *Hope he doesn’t overdose on all that attention.* Though Montenegro’s bedside manner would never win prizes.

“Would you lie still?” she moans. “My head is killing me, I ache all over, can’t you just let me get this medicine on you and then go lie down?”

“What are you putting it on with, a trowel?” Flynn snaps. “Or is that sandpaper? I’ve got rebound, too, you know. Just leave me alone—I’ll heal.”

Throwing up her hands, she stands up.

“Fine! Heal then, damn you.”

She moves off, muttering to herself, and collapses on another bundle of rags in a corner.

O’Connor settles down silently beside Flynn and takes up the job of putting ointment on his cuts. He doesn’t object, though he flinches from time to time.

Looking around, McCoy catches Chekhov’s eye.

He grins, then says in a whisper, “You see, Doctor, she seems to have gotten over her fear of him.”

“Hmm. Looks like it. Where have you three been?”

“Trying to find a way into the palace compound.”

“What! Are you crazy? What on earth makes you want to get into Ocht’s nest?”

Chekhov fidgets for a moment, looking embarrassed.

“It was Flynn’s idea, Doctor. He wants us to break into the palace.”

“With this lot? You’d be killed in a heartbeat, never mind that you have Montenegro and Flynn with you. What does he hope to gain, anyway, besides suicide?”

“He wants us to capture Ocht.”

“Capture *Ocht*? Just waltz in there with these kids, grab the man, then by some miracle waltz back out? My God, did I fall through a looking glass?”

“Well, he says if we can’t capture him, we’ll have to...” He looks down. “To neutralize him.”

“Great. Assassins will out, I suppose. But turning you three into killers...”

“McCoy,” Flynn says, propping himself up on his elbows and grimacing. “Your humanitarian impulses do you credit, but I really can’t see any other way. The man is evil, a large number of people are undoubtedly going to die if he isn’t stopped. Even after raiding information centers and pillaging the planet’s net, we still don’t know where the Federation citizens are being held. And even if we did, we don’t have the manpower or equipment to get them out, let alone off planet. Even if Starfleet comes through with ships and Marines, a surgical strike won’t stay surgical for long. We can’t occupy a planet. There is no other way. As I am in command of this mission, Chekhov and the others are only following my orders.”

“Now where have I heard that before?” McCoy scowls. “Auschwitz, maybe? Murder is murder, Flynn. I know you can, but I hope these others can live with themselves afterwards if you’re successful.”

None of them, not even Flynn, meet his eye.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

Serenely circling the planet are two alien warships.

Their masters' races have been enemies, then uneasy allies, and now are somewhat less than either. The negotiators aboard are competitors for a ripe plum of Federation technology, and this delicate situation keeps the Romulan and Klingon ships on opposite sides of the planet. Competition could so easily provoke a confrontation, and confrontation, a war. Neither of their peoples can afford a war just now, at least not with each other.

With the Federation...well, that could be another matter.

Suddenly, there are three more ships nearby, popping out of warp in tight formation, shields up. First the Romulan ship, which is closer, then the Klingon, move to intercept. It is not an unexpected development for Federation ships to show up. The other two become by tacit agreement allies of the moment.

Aboard *Excelsior*, Captain Hikiru Sulu gravely regards the alien ships' images in the viewer at the front of his bridge. He is a placid, slender Japanese, with an angular face and keen eyes that seem to miss nothing.

"Commander Scott, Captain Smythe," he says in his dry, precise voice, "are we ready?"

"Aye, Cap'n Sulu," Scott's voice says from the air. "*Enterprise* is at your disposal. Let's go get the captain."

It is clear, even with all the other captains about, that there is only one *captain*.

"Right, Commander," Smythe agrees, his upper class English accent a nice counterpoint to Scott's burr. "*Indomitable* standing by."

The three Federation ships are deployed as a triangle pointed away from the planet. *Excelsior* and *Enterprise* are at the front, with the trooper ship, more lightly armored, bringing up the rear.

*Excelsior* is a huge ship, sleek and elegant. It is newer and in many ways more advanced than *Enterprise*; the shape of things to come, or so they say. By rights, *Enterprise* should look old and outdated as it now flanks its younger cousin, yet somehow it manages to look both majestic and fierce, a wolf to *Excelsior*'s silky and dangerous polar bear, even with its injured saucer.

*Indomitable* is shorter than *Enterprise*, but bulkier. It lacks the cylindrical secondary hull that the other two have supporting their warp nacelles. Instead, it has only a primary hull, deeper than either of the other two ships'. Two warp nacelles sprout directly beneath the saucer. Enormous hanger doors are spotted around both the top and bottom of the hull, and an oversized impulse drive blunts the back of the disk. Behind the doors are rows of landing craft, atmospheric aircraft, and intrasystem fighters. One set of the bottom doors opens slowly now, disgorging a dozen small darts that swarm out to take up stations around the three ships like bees around a hive.

Sulu uses the bridge's viewer to check the sides, aft, above, below. He nods to himself, satisfied at the deployment. That is about the only thing he is satisfied with.

The two ships facing him across the void are incredibly dangerous. He has fought each kind (*Older versions of each kind*, he reminds himself) as helmsman aboard *Enterprise*. But never

both together that he can remember. Different armament, different tactics, radically different psychologies.

And all those other times, he was not captain. The captain then had been someone supremely competent, someone whose orders you could follow confidently, without worrying about the outcome of the battle being tipped by mistakes. Sulu was as sure of himself as any other commander in Starfleet, but all the same, he found himself wishing that Kirk were aboard rather than down on the planet's surface somewhere.

He is pleased to be able to see the Klingons and Romulans, at least. It means that they are trying to warn or frighten off the Federation ships, not necessarily immediately attack them. Otherwise, they would be cloaked.

He leans forward, takes a sip of tea from the bone china cup on the low table in front of him. He catches his reflection in the tea's surface. Both the tea and his face seem calm and placid.

He wonders if Kirk was as nervous inside his cool exterior all those other times as he is now.

“Open a hailing frequency,” he says. “Captains of the Klingon and Romulan vessels. This is Captain Hikiru Sulu of the Federation starship *Excelsior*. We are here to rescue Federation citizens on Athena, a Federation planet. We require you to stand aside.”

“Coded traffic between their vessels, Captain,” Uhura’s voice says via their own secure intraship link.

*Probably squabbling over who gets to make the threats*, he thinks. He waits.

An image of a stout Klingon in battle uniform appears on the viewer. Deep ridges form a vee on his forehead, echoed below by his frowning eyebrows. Klingons even in a good mood look angry; this one is not in a good mood.

“K’Planak of the Klingon bird-of-prey *Kalanach*,” he says. “You have no authority here. Athena has declared itself a sovereign world, a status our governments”—he jerks his head sideways, apparently indicating the Romulans—“accept. We and our Romulan...colleagues...aboard the warbird *Sehnar* were already here on business when the governor requested protection of his planet’s sovereignty against the hegemonic intentions of the Federation. On his behalf, I demand you withdraw at once. He especially resents the presence of *Enterprise*. Kirk attacked and destroyed a defense satellite without provocation, killing many innocent personnel.”

“Without provocation,” Sulu hears Scott mutter incredulously over the intraship link and has to suppress a grin. “If that wasna provocation, then I’m a bleedin’ Londoner—no offense, Cap’n Smythe.”

Sulu regards K’Planak for a few moments, his face expressionless.

“I’m surprised, K’Planak. I wouldn’t expect a Klingon warrior to be at the beck and call of a human.”

K’Planak visibly bristles and starts to say something, but another voice, too low to be heard distinctly, says something in Klingon. *Probably the ambassador*, thinks Sulu. Or whatever functionary exists in Klingon society to barter for human slaves. Slowly, the captain relaxes, though he still glowers at Sulu.

“I am at no one’s ‘beck and call,’ Sulu,” the Klingon finally spits out, “especially not a human’s. We are simply acting as good neighbors to Athena. You have no authority or right here.”

“Nevertheless, I am going to establish orbit about the planet. The Federation has not accepted Ocht’s statement of secession as the will of the Athenian people. Until then, Athena is still a Federation planet, and you and your Romulan friends are trespassers in Federation space. We do not want an interspecies incident, but I advise you to move aside, because we’re coming through.”

He motions and the viewscreen goes blank.

“Scotty, Captain Smythe, maintain formation. Helm, ahead one third impulse.”

“Aye, sir,” the woman at the helm says, “ahead one third impulse.”

“Divert more power to the forward shields, and stand by phasers and photon torpedoes.”

“Aye, sir.”



The Federation ships move as one toward their adversaries, who at first refuse to give ground. Either the bird-of-prey or the warbird would be reasonable matches for *Excelsior*, more than a match for *Enterprise*. But the third ship, especially its harrying fighters, throws the balance to the Federation.

The alien commanders are belligerent, but not stupid. Without unseemly haste, they turn their ships about and salvage some dignity by escorting the other ships to orbit. But it is an orbit of Sulu’s, not the aliens’, choosing. He refuses to be shepherded too near the remaining orbital defense platforms.

“Intrasytem fighters leaving the defense satellites,” Sulu’s science officer says. “About twenty of them heading this way.”

“I’m sure there are others coming from the satellites we don’t see,” he says. “*Indomitable*, deploy additional fighters to counter the ones arriving soon, and prepare your landing craft.”

“Aye, Captain,” Smythe says. “Landing craft and their fighter escort standing by.”

Sulu hopes the other ships will stand off, but doubts it. And they will undoubtedly not stand idly by as landing craft exit *Indomitable*, even if it means a direct armed conflict with the Federation ships. This close to Athena’s unknown, but undoubtedly powerful, defensive net, the balance of power has again shifted.

He sighs. The weight of the galaxy seems to be on his shoulders at the moment. One wrong move, too much force applied, and it will be war with the Klingons, the Romulans, or God help the Federation, with both.

He wishes Kirk had remained aboard *Enterprise* where he belongs. Not only would his old friend and captain now be safe, but he would be in command of the mission and it would have been *his* worry.

And he would have thought of something, Sulu knows. He would have pulled the fat from the fire as he has done so many times before.

Now, though, it is up to Sulu, with help from Scotty, Uhura, Smythe, and the rest.

*All of us able officers, he thinks sadly, but no Kirk among us.*

## Chapter Twenty-Five

McCoy is awakened by a sound he assumes is what people who have never dealt much with death would call a “death rattle,” though it’s a trifle loud. He sits up and looks at the source. Flynn is sitting with his head between his spread-apart knees, coughing blood and other vile-looking things into a wad of rags.

It’s morning, he realizes, and the few others in the hideout are staring at Flynn with emotions ranging from fear to concern to disgust.

He quickly moves to help. Flynn shakes his head and puts out a hand to wave him off, then another fit of coughing wracks him. McCoy is amazed that he can do that much. It’s pretty clear he is dying.

The coughing subsides finally.

“Sorry,” Flynn says, his voice weak-sounding. “That’s a crappy way to wake everybody up.”

“How do you feel?” McCoy says, still sure he’s talking to a dead man.

Flynn must see his thoughts by the expression on his face, for he laughs a little, which causes more coughing.

“I’m okay, believe it or not, more or less,” he says finally. He waves a hand vaguely at the mess between his legs. “Just my body clearing out some dead lung tissue. Really, it’s not as bad as it looks.” He looks down at the rag again, makes a face. “Guess it couldn’t be.”

McCoy looks Flynn over carefully. He is very pale, but otherwise seems, as he says, to be okay. The cuts and bruises from the fight are barely visible. Even his broken arm—which, McCoy is horrified to see, Flynn unsplinted during the night—seems whole, though apparently still tender when he experimentally presses where the break was.

“Damnedest thing *I* ever saw,” the doctor mutters to himself.

During this time, O’Connor has come over to where Flynn is lying and has put her hand on his shoulder across from McCoy, as if helping him sit up. Instead of shrugging her away, as he would have expected, the spy actually at one point pats her hand and smiles at her reassuringly. Montenegro, McCoy notices, remains seated across the room, watching the tableau expressionlessly.

Finally, Flynn gently removes O’Connor’s hand and pushes himself to his feet. He is unsteady, but remains standing.

“Your friend was really something,” he says to Montenegro. “I haven’t been this badly beaten up for a hundred years.”

“Welcome to my planet,” she says.

He chuckles, which turns into a little more coughing.

“Well, work to do. No rest for the wicked. I was thinking while trying to sleep last night about what we should do...”

He is interrupted by Chekhov and LaRue barging in from outside. Without knocking—which almost gets them shot by the woman on watch inside.

Chekhov looks momentarily sheepish, but then his excitement overcomes him, and he grins.

“The *Enterprise* is back!” he says. The others cluster around.

The crewmen have been doing routine check-ins every day on a coded channel, from different locations each time to avoid discovery, with no success. This morning, however, they were answered by Scotty himself. He reported that the three Starfleet ships were in orbit and were being harassed, but not yet attacked, by intrasystem fighters. Their shields are up, of course, so there is no question of beaming up Flynn and the others, even if that were desirable.

Flynn absorbs this news pensively. McCoy is pleased to see color returning to his cheeks, and his gait getting steadier as he slowly paces.

“What do we do now, Captain?” Chekhov asks, winding down at last.

“Well, I had a plan, but now that we know we have some help overhead...”

He is interrupted again, this time by a coded knock at the door.

“Apparently I’m never to properly develop a plan.” He sighs and motions with his head for the sentry to open the door. “At least whoever this is knows how to knock.”

Chekhov looks abashed, then sees that Flynn is smiling slightly and grins.

A pretty freckle-faced woman enters, with the sentry from outside holding a projectile handgun in her side.

“This woman came here looking for Dr. McCoy, she says.”

“Helena!” McCoy is over to her side in a second, pushing the sentry’s gun aside impatiently.

The sentry looks questioningly at Flynn, who nods and motions him back outside.

“Flynn,” McCoy says, turning to him, one arm around the woman’s shoulders, “this the other Federation doctor I told you about, the one that helped the other cell.”

“Ah.” Flynn says. “Dr. Mendoza, is it? Good to meet you.” He shakes her hand. “But how did you find us, and more important, were you followed?”

He glanced at Montenegro as he said this, and she nods, gets up, and fades silently out the door, more quickly than a normal human should move.

“I don’t think so. I’ve been looking for you since just after you called last night, Leonard.” She blushes prettily. McCoy realizes it’s the first time she’s called him by his first name. “I left the safehouse, like you said, but I didn’t just want to hide and wait for Ocht to come get me. So I went back to the hospital.”

“You what?” McCoy says, surprised.

“I went back to the hospital. Don’t worry, I was very careful. I hung around where they were loading the ambulances for a run to take care of the Federation prisoners. They weren’t being very careful themselves. I got close enough to plant one of the tracking devices we got from the government lab. I put it in on a crate of supplies—it’s small enough it shouldn’t be noticed, especially after I stuck it in a wad of gum I was chewing. Mr. Spock said that they could be tracked for quite a distance.”

“That was a very brave thing to do,” Flynn says. “Smart, too. We’ll at least know where some of the Federation people are by days’ end. Thank you. But how did you find us?”

“Well, I’d overheard Leonard and the others talking about a code phrase to use with the underground that would let them know I was from the Federation. Or rather, would make them think I was you, I guess.”

She looked at Flynn for a moment with her head tipped to one side. “They thought you were dead, you know. Anyway, one of the people in the cell we were with knew someone in another cell, who knew someone, who knew someone... Finally, I managed to get to someone who knew this cell. They didn’t know you or Leonard were part of it, of course, but I’d asked about any cells that seemed especially active or successful recently. I figured that if Leonard and the others were here, you would be doing much better than average.”

She blushes a little again.

McCoy looks like he, too, is embarrassed, though obviously pleased.

“Do you think,” Flynn asks him, “that your ego will be able to fit through that little bitty door when it’s time to leave?”

McCoy grunts. “Not at this rate.” But he smiles, and now his arm is more firmly around Helena’s shoulders.

“Good work,” Flynn says to her. “But I’m afraid I have some bad news.” He tells her about Kirk and Spock. She is visibly shaken.

The door opens again, very rapidly, and Montenegro enters. She scowls at the sentry before he can raise his weapon, and he subsides quickly.

“Is everyone *trying* to get shot today?” Flynn asks the room in general.

“All clear,” Montenegro says, ignoring him. She slumps a little and rubs her forehead absently, frowning.

“Thanks,” Flynn says. He quickly tells Montenegro what Helena has said.

“Good,” she nods. She looks the other woman over appraisingly, notes McCoy’s proprietary interest and grins at him.

She turns back to Flynn. “We reconnoiter?”

“We reconnoiter.”



Two lovers walk down the street past the rather disreputable-looking building, holding hands. The façade is covered with posters advertising plays, kungota and classical concerts, martial arts contests. An observant passer-by might notice that the latter seem to amuse the couple.

“So why here?” Flynn asks.

“It’s a big multipurpose hall,” Montenegro replies, leaning close as if to put her head on his shoulder as they walk. “Like a coliseum, with a big open floor. Probably the only place available where they could put all those people and still keep an eye on them. A hotel would be too risky, always the chance that somebody could slip out of a room.”

Truth to be told, Flynn is having more trouble concentrating on the task at hand than he would like to admit. It’s been a very long time since he has been able to stroll leisurely with a woman, and though this is not exactly leisure, it is very tempting to allow himself to imagine that it is.

The day is pleasantly warm, but not hot, the sky is deep blue-green, and the light is clear and invigorating, like autumn on Earth. Only his lifelong paranoia keeps him alert.

Monty is not helping, either. She is truly in camouflage, wearing a loose white blouse and a mid-calf, straight blue *skirt*, of all things. She has continued throughout the mission to allow herself to slim down, though keeping a good amount of muscle mass. She's quite tall, and broad-shouldered, and she has kept enough mass in her breasts to have very pleasing figure, especially in her current outfit, which accentuates her height. Her face has a pleasing angularity, she has changed her eye color to a bright blue, and her mouth, which usually seems ready to smirk derisively at a moment's notice, is soft and smiling. Either she's a good actress, he thinks, or she is enjoying herself as well.

Montenegro, for her part, she is tempted to leave her head on Flynn's shoulder. It would be in character, after all, for the role she's playing. The day is so pretty, and Flynn is handsome enough, and the play of his firm muscles under her cheek is so nice...

He hasn't changed; he looks the same as he did when she first met him—attacked him—on the bridge of her ship; that seems so long ago now. And why should he change? Attractiveness isn't a liability to him, it's an asset, within bounds. His goal, she imagines, is to be as handsome as possible without being noticeable. Looks get results when it comes to inveigling one's way into other people's confidences. Not like her situation at all. She had to command respect from as hard a group of men and women as one was likely to find outside of a penal colony. She had to look, as well as act, as tough as nails.

Now, she is glad that she decided to change her own appearance back to something like what she remembered she originally looked like. She feels attractive, even sensual, which is a pleasant change from her self-imposed role as bitch-captain on *Bayou*.

And Flynn seems different since his fight with Stefan last night, like the repairs he had to make cleaned out some mental cobwebs, too. Maybe he was closer to dying than anyone thought; Stefan beat him up pretty badly.

But then, that is silly. Chances are he has been near death more times than just about anyone else still living. No, if anything, it's just the nice weather and the chance to enjoy it. And getting away from the kids and the *Enterprise* crewmen. She at least feels like the two of them have taken on the role of surrogate parents, and it is tiresome.

"Let's go over to that park," he points across the street, "and watch for a while, then when we get a feel for the place, see if we can get inside long enough to see how many people there are in there."

"Won't that be a little suspicious, just sitting and watching?" she asks as they cross the street. The grass feels good as it brushes her sandalled feet.

*Sensuous*, she thinks. The word of the day.

He sits on a bench and pulls her gently down beside him.

"Well, we're acting like we're young lovers," he says, "no one will notice us if we act like we're smooching."

She rolls her eyes at him, but it's pro forma. She finds herself a little intrigued—and a little excited—by this aspect of the role.

"Okay, mister," she says, "but I haven't done this in a while—don't blame me if your nose gets broken."

He laughs, a rare unguarded laugh that she finds unexpectedly charming, and pulls her to him.

They are about at the middle of the building, and they kiss in such a way that they can both see complementary parts of it. For a few seconds, Flynn finds himself actually watching the building. Then he gives up, about the time Monty has reached the same point.

Several minutes later, she gently disengages herself.

"Well." She feels herself blush, which makes her blush more before she has a chance to catch and stop it. She can't even remember the last time *that* happened. "They could have moved parts for a couple of starships in there and assembled them by now."

"Yeah," Flynn says, himself clearly embarrassed. "Some spies we'd make in a novel, eh?"

But he doesn't take his arms from around her, nor does she pull back.

"That was...nice," she mutters, tentatively, after a moment or two.

She feels extraordinarily vulnerable at the moment. If he laughs at her, she'll die. *Or trigger and kill him*, she thinks, knowing all the time that there is no way at this point that she would really try to hurt him.

He surprises her by taking her face softly in his hands and looking into her eyes for a moment.

"Yes, it was," he says, then kisses her again, more tenderly than she would have thought him capable of.

With a look of real regret, he sits back and brushes hair out of her face with one hand. "But we've got work to do."

"Oh, yeah," she says, sighing. "*That*. You take the right side, I'll take the left?"

"Sounds reasonable. Remember, just far enough to get the information we need, either by tricorder or visually. We don't want to spook them."

"And Monty, be careful."

She stops from where she was about to turn to go, surprised.

"You too," she says.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

Back at the safehouse, McCoy and the others are beginning to get anxious, when they hear the coded tap at the door. Flynn and Montenegro slip inside.

“Well?” he asks. “Did you find them?”

The two augments glance at one another in a way he’s not seen before, as if each is waiting to allow the other to speak. Odd.

“Yes, Doctor,” Flynn says. He describes where they are being held. “There are eighty-five people in there, some of whom are undoubtedly guards—we only got the count by tricorder once we slipped inside their security net. We’ll have to warn *Enterprise* to be prepared for some wolves in with the sheep.”

“So what now?” McCoy asks.

Helena Mendoza has moved up to stand by him. “We *are* going to rescue them, aren’t we? Some of my friends are likely to be in there.”

Flynn shakes his head ruefully. “I wish we had the time to wait until we could find all the Fed personnel. If we spring this bunch, it’s going to be that much harder to do a repeat performance later.”

“But the Klingons and Romulans...”

“I know, Doctor Mendoza,” he says patiently. “That’s why we’ve got to try to at least get these people out of here. We don’t have much time.”

“Monty came up with a plan while we were coming back from the place.” He stops and looks at Monty encouragingly.

*Well, something’s going on,* McCoy thinks.

“Right,” she says. “If we try to break them out, there are going to be casualties—probably a lot of them. And we don’t have anywhere to hide that many people. So what we’re going to do is take out enough shield generators that *Enterprise* and the other ships can beam the hostages up.”

“Do we know where the shield generators are?” McCoy asks. “I mean, I know where one is, but we’ve got to make sure it’s the only one covering that area.”

“Right, Doctor,” Flynn says. “When the town goes to bed tonight, Monty and I will go in search of the shield generators with tricorders. We’re less likely than any of you to be seen, and if seen, to be caught. And hopefully, by waiting that late, there will be fewer people out to catch sight of two *very* fast people moving about.

“Until then, let’s make plans for what we’ll do when we do find the generators.”

“No.”

It is Chekhov. All eyes turn toward him. He is standing with O’Connor and LaRue, and all three of them seem grimly determined.

“What?” Flynn says, more surprised than annoyed.

“No, sir. We do nothing until we also plan how to free the captain.”

“But Mr. Chekhov, the mission...”

“Can go to hell,” McCoy puts in, “as far as I’m concerned, if we don’t rescue Jim and Spock. Chekhov’s right.”

Flynn looks from one to the other of them. The students watch them, but studiously try to look as if they are not watching. Monty looks upset, or possibly annoyed. *On my behalf?* he wonders, then shakes his head to clear it of frivolous thoughts.

“We can do this without you, you know,” Flynn says, as calmly as he can in the face of this nascent mutiny. He wishes he were as confident as he sounds that they *can* do it without them.

“But not without me,” Montenegro says slowly, somewhat sadly.

Flynn looks at her in surprise. *“Et tu, Brute?”*

“Come on, Flynn,” she says, beseeching. “When did we ever have any loyalty to anyone? These people *do*. It’s a *good* thing. Let’s help them free their captain. Besides, he’s a good man.”

He says nothing for a few moments, too aware that they’re all watching him, waiting for his decision, yet absolutely resolute should he decide against them.

*This, he thinks, is why I work alone.*

He sighs. “What the hell. Kirk *is* a good man, and too valuable to leave to the gentle ministrations of the good governor.”

Strangely, he feels relieved, almost uplifted. He is doing something that flies in the face of the good of his mission, for once, but he finds he doesn’t care.

“But,” he says, glaring at each of the five of them in turn, “only one of us is going to go after Kirk: me. The rest of you free the hostages. Agreed?”

The *Enterprise* crewmen nod, relieved. They obviously think of him as the most competent and capable of them all, which he is. Only Monty seems about to argue, but she looks up and catches his eye, and the fight suddenly goes out of her.

“Okay, Flynn,” she says quietly. “You go play hero, I’ll shepherd these guys.”

She mouths *Be careful*. The others don’t see, but Flynn does, and nods, smiling.

The night air is pleasantly soft, warm and humid, seeming to encourage languid movements, thoughts.

*Whole damned day is trying to undermine me*, Flynn thinks, ignoring the urge to just turn over and watch the sunset.

He is prone on the flat roof of the safehouse—really just part of a deserted warehouse—peering over a low, crumbling brick parapet at the street below. Twice, there have been patrols past the building’s front door, and twice Ocht’s police have passed without any sign that they are the least bit interested in what might be inside. And Flynn has been watching carefully.

The day before, O’Connor and LaRue tapped into the local police network from an abandoned office in a high-rise a kilometer from here. They took with them a meteor pulse transmitter. After it was turned on when they left the office, it set about bouncing coded squirts off meteor trails high in the atmosphere at agreed-upon intervals. By sending a several very low-intensity radar pulses first, it was able to find the ionization trail in just the right spot, then send the real transmission before the trail disappears. In this way, sporadic contact has been established with Flynn’s ship.

Shelley is now receiving periodic synopses of low-security traffic, compressed and gated through the little transmitter. Nothing will be on that channel of a particularly important nature, but Shelley will be able to analyze it and detect anything that suggests a heightened security posture in the area near where they are. If that happens—and only then—will the ship break its own silence and risk exposure by sending a squirt to warn them.

Flynn wishes he could talk to his ship. He misses Shelley. The AI has been his primary companion for many years, and sometimes his only companion for months at a time. He thinks of it as a close friend. Heaven alone knows what the AI thinks of him, or even if such questions makes any sense.

He'd also like to talk over with Shelley whatever it is that is going on between him and Monty. Not that the computer would be able to shed a great deal of light on human relationships—if that is what indeed was starting—but it usually manages to ask the right questions to let Flynn look at things in ways he otherwise wouldn't.

“Hi.”

Flynn jumps and comes close to triggering. His heart is racing. That O'Connor could have come up behind him without him hearing anything does not bode well for his effectiveness.

“You startled me,” he says, rather unnecessarily, he realizes. “I didn’t hear you walk up.”

She grins mischievously. “Well... I confess, I *was* sneaking, just to see if I could.”

“Sneaking up on an augment can be hazardous to your health,” he says.

She makes a production of looking down at herself, then checking her arms and shrugging. “Nope. I seem to be all in one piece.”

He smiles despite himself. “Well, then, how about this: Considering my advanced age, you could have given me a heart attack. Then who’d rescue your captain?”

She sits down beside him, leaning back against the parapet.

“So what’s going on out there?” She motions behind her.

“Not much, apparently. I would have expected the good governor to mobilize the army, what with two of his augments dying violently recently. We’ve been in this safehouse longer than I would like. I’m wondering if it still deserves the name.”

“I just talked that over with Gustov. Believe it or not, he is starting to act like a real cell leader. He suggests that when you and Monty go out later, we move to a new place. Chekhov and LaRue are checking it out now.”

“Good idea.”

He pulls himself up to sit beside her. There is no parapet on the other side of the building, and facing this direction, he can see over the neighboring buildings to the river. The sun has already disappeared behind the trees on the other side, and now the river looks like molten iron as it reflects the riotous colors in the clouds overhead. They watch in companionable silence for a few minutes, the sounds of traffic behind them blending into a surprisingly soothing sussuration.

“You’ve changed.”

Flynn is surprised. “Me? How?”

“You’ve gotten softer. No, I don’t mean *soft*,” she says, seeing his frown. “Just the hard edge seems to have...mellowed...a little.”

He is about to protest, but then thinks back to this afternoon’s interlude with Monty. He sighs, shakes his head.

“Maybe I have, at that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” he says, and he doesn’t. It wasn’t just getting the stuffing kicked out of him last night—that wasn’t really all that bad, all things considered. There are far meaner things in the galaxy than even augmented humans, and he’s had the misfortune to meet a few of them in his day.

No, if anything it’s being around the *Enterprise* people and Monty day in and day out. For a loner like him, it’s a novelty having a group of, if not friends, at least comrades, people he can absolutely trust to help watch his back as he watches theirs. He tries to express this to her.

She nods, considering. “Well.” She smiles at him. “Whatever the reason, I’m glad.”

“I’ve not been that much of a hard-ass to you,” he says, chiding. “I even let you get away with pulling a phaser on me in my own quarters.”

“You let me...!” She punches his arm. “You jerk. I got the drop on you, and you know it.” She sobered. “You were flustered that night, but still hard-edged. Now you’re confident, but also more human.”

“Thank you, Dr. Freud.”

“Now, Monty...”

“What about Monty?” he asks, a trifle too quickly.

Which does not escape her notice.

“I was about to say,” she says, “that Monty *is* a real hard-ass, but then I realized that that’s not really true, at least not today. What did you two do, anyway, while you were out?”

One of the few benefits of being an augment is the tight control one has of both one’s voluntary and autonomic nervous systems.

*Damned if I’ll let her see me blush*, he thinks.

“What’s it to you?” he says, hoping for the bantering tone they’d established earlier.

“Well, I don’t know.” she says thoughtfully. “After sleeping together all those nights on the ship, I thought we had something going.”

He stares at her for a moment, then sees she is kidding and nudges her with his elbow. “Jerk,” he says. “You wait until I’m all human-acting, then you pick on me.”

They sit for a while longer in silence, watching the unfamiliar stars come out. They have nothing to do until it’s time for him and Monty to go on their little outing.

“I’m sorry I pulled a phaser on you that night,” she says softly.

“What? Oh. Don’t worry about it. I get that all the time. Even if you’d pulled the trigger, I’d have had it coming to me.”

“Still...”

“Why’d you come on this mission, Jean?”

She takes so long answering that he begins to wonder if she has heard him.

“I wanted to watch you, to get to know you. To *judge* you, I guess.”

“Just judge? Or judge and executioner?”

Their shoulders are touching, and he feels her tense a little. She sighs, and the tension goes away.

“The thought had crossed my mind. I hate you when you’re triggered. You’re what I remember there in my living room killing my dad: a monster. Even now, even when it’s necessary, I can hardly bear to be in the same room with you when you’re like that.”

“And untriggered?” He is more anxious about the answer to that question than he would have believed possible.

She turns her head to look at him, her wide frank eyes staring into his. “Untriggered is what saved you.”

He starts to protest, to tell her that *he* was never in any danger from her, that he was always in control, but then he realizes that he is just fooling himself, not her. She has had ample opportunities to kill him, had she wanted to, and he allowed her those opportunities.

“Untriggered,” she continues, still looking into his eyes, “you’re just a guy, a decent guy who is trapped by circumstance and who he is, just like the rest of us. You’re even kind of nice, when you’re not trying to be some kind of super spy.”

“I like you.” She looks away. “Quite a bit, actually.”

He finds himself wishing for a good, old-fashioned fight to the death. Something less momentous and less dangerous than these entanglements he seems to be wandering into.

“I like you, too, Jean,” he says, rather lamely.

He *does* like her. He also finds her incredibly sexy. If it weren’t for the age difference, the fact that he killed her father, and that he watched her grow up, this conversation would be thrilling. Okay, more thrilling. And if it weren’t for whatever is going on with Monty. If anything is.

His head is beginning to hurt.

Suddenly, impulsively, she leans over and kisses him. He doesn’t pull away; it would be rude, and it would hurt her feelings. And it’s not at all unpleasant.

“I was going to ask,” a voice says out of the darkness, “if you were ready to go, but I see that you are.”

“Um, Monty,” he manages, gently separating himself from Jean and standing. “Yeah. I’m ready. To go.”

*Damn!*

Even as dark as it is, he is aware of a certain smugness in Jean’s expression. And a careful non-expression on Monty’s face.

“Then trigger and let’s go.” She turns her back on him, walks to the roof’s edge, and jumps off.

“Jean, we’ll talk when I get back. Move the cell.”

“Monty knows where we’ll be,” she says.

Awkwardly, she takes his hand. He squeezes her hand reassuringly and smiles more confidently than he feels, then triggers and follows Monty over the roof's edge.

The cold killing clarity of the augmentation is welcome for once. Now if he can just find Monty, and if she doesn't try to kill him, he'll be all set.

He grins at the prospect.

Montenegro and Flynn drift like shadows through the night, not speaking, making no noise. Their hands and faces, even the sclera of their eyes, are chocolate-brown, helping them blend into the darkness. Flynn was pleased when he discovered that Monty's designers had also added the genetically-tailored chromophores to her repertoire. Natural pigment was apparently all they'd done for her; he can also manage primitive camouflage, should the need arise.

They have been following tricorder readings of shield strength, using hand signals to communicate, since leaving the safehouse. Now, they approach a huge, unwindowed building, and stop a few score meters away and crouch behind a parked ground vehicle.

"No active sensor sweeps this out far," Flynn whispers.

"They could still hear us, if they're listening," she says, but without concern.

"I'll circle that way, meet you on the other side?"

"Yeh."

A few seconds later, they are crouched behind another car on the far side of the building.

"Tricorder says that's the source, from my side," Flynn says.

"Mine, too."

"Okay, one down. McCoy was right about it. Shield strength seems to indicate another one might be providing redundancy near the holding area."

"Yeah, we should split up, run out a ways, triangulate."

He regards her for a second. "If we do, can I trust you not to kill anyone?"

"That why you've been hanging so close?" she asks, irritated. "Afraid I can't handle myself?"

"Yeah." Then something human nudges the augment's control for a moment. "And you're not that unpleasant to be around, you know, even triggered."

"Hmph." She looks at him and shakes her head. He can't tell if she's annoyed for the incident with Jean, or if it's just a triggered augment's lack of interest in anything non-violent.

"Well, anyway, you do seem to be better controlled," he admits. "You didn't take a swing at me just now, for instance."

"Night's young, bucko."

The new safehouse is as dingy as the old one, but this time it's a free-standing house on the edge of the city. Rather far from anywhere they're likely to need to be, Flynn thinks, but also rather less near the center of Ocht's fist, too.

Both he and Monty remain triggered as they approach the house, just in case. She gives the coded knock, the door opens, and they slip inside.

There is an instant of tension until the two people in the room, a man and a woman, recognize them. Monty slaps a phaser from the woman's hand, sending it clattering against the wall and bringing half a dozen others into the room.

“Sorry,” the woman says, rubbing her hand. “You don’t look like you.”

“You look better,” the man says, grinning. Unlike them, his skin is naturally brown.

Flynn waits until he sees Monty detrigger, seeming to slump into herself, then lets his own changes subside. Immediately, his head begins pounding, and his various injuries from the night before start aching. He looks at his hand as the chromophores allow his skin to fade to white.

“Next time,” he says to the man, “maybe I’ll do Andoran for you.” He holds up his hand toward him and commands the skin to turn pale blue for a second.

“Well?” McCoy asks. He had come in with the others to see what the commotion was. “When you’re done showing off, want to tell us what you found?”

Flynn goes to a map of the city pinned to a wall and quickly shows them where the shield generators are.

“We split you into two teams,” Monty says, then looks at Flynn.

He motions for her to continue, and flops down in the cracked red plastic chair in front of the map. “One team, with McCoy and O’Connor, will take out Generator One, let’s call it. The other, with LaRue and Chekhov, will take out Generator Two.

“I’m going to head to the coliseum. The ships overhead will beam out the Fed folks, but I want to be close enough to make sure the guards don’t do anything stupid when the shields drop.”

“How are the ships going to beam them up?” Gustov asks. “Won’t they have to drop their own shields?”

“Yeah, they will. I assume that one of the ships will drop a shield while the other two cover for them. That’s their problem, though.”

“And Flynn...?”

“Relax, Chekhov,” Flynn says, smiling tiredly. “I’m heading into the lion’s den to get your captain for you, like I promised. Are you okay with that?”

“Aye, sir!” he replies, beaming.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

The cell is dank and cold, rough stone walls and a concrete floor. A single yellow incandescent bulb hanging on a cord from the high ceiling is the only light. The stones look like they were chiseled by crude tools many years ago. In places, the mortar has been squished out from between them to form little thin ledges of cement; in other places, the mortar is gone completely. In the corners are stagnant puddles of darkness harboring who knows what vermin.

Three cots are in the room, though “cot” is a rather kind term for them. All they really are is thin mattresses, the ticking coming out of rips in the filthy cloth covering, flung onto stone ledges. Stained sheets and scratchy-looking, dirty blankets are rumpled on them.

On one cot lies a wreck of a man, old, bent, and grizzled. He snores loudly, something he seems quite good at. At least, he has been doing it without respite since Kirk and Spock were unceremoniously thrown into the cell some hours ago, after spending the past two days—and nights—being interrogated in a perfunctory, if protracted, manner by half a dozen different inquisitors. It was as if the interrogation bureaucracy had been set in motion as a matter of course, but their hearts weren’t really in it. Of the rest of the captives, they have seen nothing.

Kirk assumes that the real interrogation—or whatever—is still to come. He suspects their future holds a show trial for espionage (not that there wasn’t a case to be made), a propaganda piece as much for the Federation as for Ocht’s own citizens, then some end suitable to the crime and the barbarity of the planet.

The thought shocks him. Not the possibility of dying, but the fact that he actually accepts that this might be the end of him. He can remember being in plenty of situations surprisingly like this, but what he cannot remember is ever believing the outcome would be anything other than escape, carrying on his mission, saving the day.

At least McCoy got away. Maybe there was some hope for doing things the way Flynn’s orders read, without an invasion by Starfleet troops.

Spock seems to be studying the man on the cot.

“Probably a plant,” Kirk mutters.

“I think not, Captain,” Spock says, raising an eyebrow at Kirk. “He seems human, if the worse for wear.”

Kirk gives him an exasperated look, unsure if he is being put on or not. “A shill, Spock, an agent placed here to gather information.”

“Ah.”

“Did you hit your head when they threw us in here?”

Spock raises an eyebrow, looks slightly offended.

“Never mind, Spock, never mind.” It *has* been a very long day.

He returns to examining the cell’s door. It yields no startling new information, no revelations since last he examined it about five minutes ago. It is still large, still made of steel, still reinforced with diagonal beams, still locked.

“There appears to be no way out,” he says.

"That would be," Spock says dryly, "the primary function of a jail cell."

Kirk shoots him a dirty look and leaves the door to stand over the other occupant of the cell.

"Wake up," he says, shaking his shoulder. "We need to talk to you."

"Go away!" the old man growls, knocking Kirk's hand away. "Can't a body get a decent nap around here? I know what you want to talk about anyway. I can save us all some trouble. There's no way out of here. If I coulda escaped, I'da done it ten years ago."

"You've been here *ten years*, in this rat-infested...?"

He is interrupted by a sound at the door. It creaks open, and both he and Spock instantly whirl and ready themselves for any opportunity that might be provided.

None materializes. Two guards enter, weapons drawn, then step aside. A man in a Starfleet uniform is shoved roughly onto the floor of the cell by other guards in the corridor.

"Another of you lot," the first guard sneers. "Caught trying to sneak into the *palace*. The Governor'll deal with you all at once, that'd be my guess. Meantime, you can entertain one another—you and old Carly there."

The door slams shut. Kirk looks at the new arrival. There are Federation citizens on the planet, sure, but no uniformed Starfleet personnel here other than the ones who went with Flynn. And this fellow is not from *Enterprise*.

Though, on second thought, he looks a little familiar, somehow.

"Who...?" Kirk begins, but the other man puts his finger to his lips and looks meaningfully at the cot where "old Carly" lies, snoring again. The three move as far away as the small cell allows.

"Who are you?" Kirk whispers. "That's an *Enterprise* uniform, but I've never seen you before in my life—have I?"

"It's Flynn, Captain," Spock says quietly.

"What?" Kirk peers more closely. "I'll be damned. So it is."

Flynn is nonplussed. "Some disguise, if you can see right through it. Must be losing my touch."

"Your disguise," Spock replies matter-of-factly, "is undoubtedly good enough to pass most human inspection. I, however, am a Vulcan, and consequently more observant."

"Careful," Kirk says, "this place is undoubtedly bugged."

Flynn pulls up his tunic. He pinches a fold of skin and pulls, and a thin flesh-colored patch comes off with a slight sucking sound, exposing real skin beneath. Flynn turns it over and removes a tiny flat device.

"Not to worry, Captain. This has effectively canceled whatever bugs are here—though they may come to investigate soon."

He holds it out and sweeps the room with it. Satisfied, he puts it in a uniform pocket.

"We thought you were dead," Kirk says.

"We almost were. But we made it, though my ship has a few more dents in it now, I'm afraid. The others are all okay, and we found McCoy—or rather, he found us."

"What are *you* doing here on the planet? Decide to try playing spy for a while?"

Kirk is relieved, though nettled. But this good news is almost enough to make him forgive Flynn's insufferable smugness. Almost.

"Just trying to salvage *your* mission," he says. "You took a hell of a risk coming here. Your duty is to your mission, not us."

"That's what I told your crew, but they're a disgustingly loyal bunch." He is unsuccessful hiding the admiration in his voice.

And indeed, he does admire the *Enterprise* officers' loyalty to Kirk. It is something he has never had toward another human nor, as far as he knows, has anyone ever had toward him. And it is another sign that he has underestimated Kirk. As if his presence on the planet—and the destroyed lab that McCoy told him about—weren't proof enough that the old boy was still something more than a faint shadow of his youthful self.

"They refused to do anything else until we had at least tried to spring you from here," he continues. "Besides, I have other business in the palace, and while I'm here, might as well get you out."

"How?" Kirk sweeps the cell with a gesture. "There don't appear to be too many opportunities to just walk out."

"We'll see," he says with an irritating smile.

He examines the lock on the door carefully. The door may be old, but the lock is state-of-the-art. Electronic, probably only opening when the proper fingerprint or voiceprint is presented—from outside.

He lays his hand against it. Dimly at first, then with increasing clarity, he begins to feel the minute electrical fields building and collapsing as currents move in the lock's tiny circuits. It takes only a few minutes for him to build a mental picture of how the lock works.

Now all he has to do is pick it.

He concentrates, setting up increasingly strong, complex patterns of electrical activity in the nerves and skin of his palm. Slowly, he induces the electrons in the lock to move as he wants them to. It is a tricky business. A wrong move and half the palace's security guards will be at the door.

He withdraws his hand as if burned, gingerly replaces it.

"Damn," he says.

The other two stare at him as if he has gone more than a little out of his mind.

"May I inquire," Spock asks, "exactly what you are attempting to do?"

"I was trying to pick the lock," he says. "But something's wrong. At the last second, something in the lock shifted, and I was almost detected."

"You can do that with your *hand*?" Kirk asks.

"Yeah." He dismisses the subject with a wave of his free hand. "Just some old wetware my designers thought might come in handy. But it isn't going to do us much good, I'm afraid. The lock's programming is beyond my abilities."

He straightens from the lock and stretches. "I'm sorry I didn't have an electronic lockpick to smuggle in, Mr. Spock. You would undoubtedly have had better luck. As it is," he looks around,

squinting at the walls, the ceiling, “we’ll just have to think of something else. Maybe if the next guards they send in are unaugmented...”

Kirk thinks for a moment.

“There *might* still be a way,” he slowly says to Flynn. “But you’re not going to like it.”

“You’re right, I don’t like it,” Flynn says. “But I don’t see a better alternative. But I warn you, Spock, that I will break contact if you start to get near things you shouldn’t see.”

“Understood, Captain Flynn,” Spock says. “Now please relax.”

He touches Flynn’s temple with his right hand. Stepping behind him, he places his left hand on the other temple. He begins to sense feelings that are not his own. Nervousness, or at least anxiety, seems to flow up his arm into his brain. The familiar duality of consciousness that is an inescapable fact of a mind meld creeps into his awareness.

As he goes deeper into Flynn’s mind, he begins to sense coherent thoughts.

*An amazingly ordered mind for a human*, he thinks, aware that communication is two-way.

*Thank you, Spock*. He senses amusement. *But that’s deep enough. This way to my ‘lock pick’*.

Spock can sense a crude mental shield imperfectly blocking his access to the core of Flynn’s mentality. He makes no attempt to nudge the shield aside, though it would be childishly simple. He avoids, as much as possible, being aware of the leakage, like looking away when someone is dressing.

It is not just that Flynn would break contact were he to try. Vulcan society has had millennia to deal with the ethical consequences of its individuals’ limited telepathic abilities. The thought of prying into another being’s mind, into their privacy, is odious in the extreme. Instead, he accepts Flynn’s primitive attempt at guidance toward the schemas and neural pathways involving the task at hand.

Flynn again places his hand on the lock; Spock feels it as a ghostly overlay on the feelings from his own hand.

*Just observe for a few seconds*, Flynn thinks to him, *to get the feel of it*.

*The apropos human expression is, I believe*, Spock thinks to him, *‘don’t teach your grandmother to suck eggs’*.

Flynn chuckles aloud, causing Kirk to give the linked pair a strange look.

*Too slow*, Spock thinks regretfully. *Your senses aren’t fast enough to allow us to adapt to the lock’s semi-random changes*.

*Okay, Spock. We can fix that. Hold onto your hat*.

*My hat...?* he thinks, genuinely puzzled.

Abruptly, he becomes disoriented. The sensorium and mentality he is linked to has abruptly taken a huge leap in speed, reminding him of the transition from impulse to warp drive. Flynn has triggered, he realizes. His own mental processes are pulled faster and faster by Flynn, making him feel like he is riding a tiger, or caught in an undertow, metaphors from Flynn’s side of the link. The mental shield around the core of what is Flynn slams into place, leaks extinguished. Spock doubts he could pierce it now if he tried.

A coldness bubbles up through Flynn's/his mind, not the logical acerbity of a Vulcan, but a cold, calculating mind brutally keeping a killing rage in check. He cannot imagine that it is pleasant inhabiting such a mind.

*Don't worry about me, Spock*, Flynn thinks to him, and now the thought is not timid and faint, but as icy and direct as a stiletto into his mind. *It may be hell, but it's my hell, and I'm used to it. Just do your job and get out of my head.*

With more difficulty than he can recall ever having before, he forces himself to concentrate. The sensations coming from Flynn's hand are now easily fast enough to register the lock's internal workings. Spock observes for a few seconds, the patterns becoming in his mind part of larger patterns that begin to make sense.

*A simple program, really*, he thinks, and feels a ragged echo of irritation from Flynn before it is squelched by the fist of his iron control.

He gingerly begins to accept control of Flynn's ability to produce electric fields, the schemas feeling strange yet intimately familiar. A nudge at just the right time...now...and a slight readjustment there...

A dull click comes from the lock. Flynn's mental control is still crude in comparison with Spock's, but he has never felt such raw power in another humanoid mind, as if the body's changes somehow have bled over into it. He feels himself shoved out, and there is very little he could do about it even if he wanted to.

He feels dull and slow-witted as he comes down to his normal speed.

"Nice work, Spock," Flynn admits. "Now let's get out of here before they notice the lock is open."

"What about him?" Kirk asks, motioning to the other prisoner.

"Good point. We can't just let him call attention to us. Spock, can you take care of our friend there? Vulcan methods of putting someone out of the way are likely to be much gentler and less permanent than mine."

Spock nods. He places a hand on the man's shoulder, and is surprised to feel, through his recently-used telepathic sense, that the man is wide awake. No matter. He squeezes for good contact and manipulates the man's nervous system. The man opens his eyes in surprise, then slumps into unconsciousness.

"Let's go," Flynn says.

"Where?" Kirk asks. "What's the plan?"

"Plan?" Flynn snorts. "What plan? More like a general idea, I'm afraid. We found the scientists, at least one cache of them. The rest of my group should now or soon be rescuing them. McCoy and Chekhov are in charge. We'll rendezvous with them, then you folks get the hell off Athena. Apparently *Excelsior* and *Enterprise* are above, skirmishing with the Romulans and Klingons, and *Indomitable* is standing by for a strike. That much we've been able to get via tightbeam to *Enterprise*. Hopefully, all that will keep Ocht looking up long enough for us to get the scientists, sabotage the shield generators, and get out before he realizes what is going on."

"You said 'you folks'—what about you?"

“I have one more thing to attend to here, then I’ll try to join you.”

“You intend,” Spock states, “to assassinate Governor Ocht.”

That much had been apparent to him during the link without even having to pry. A raw hatred, even unaugmented, directed at the man, and a clear purpose.

“Only if need be,” Flynn dissembles. “And I have to get rid of his augments—they’re a menace to everyone. Now come on!”

The corridor is empty, just a long open space almost daring them to enter it, to step out from the shadows. They accept the challenge, expecting bullets, phaser fire, or augmented guards at every step.

They turn left at an intersection with another corridor, this one in pastel blue. The intersection looks identical to three others they have passed, to fifteen others they can see straight ahead. Unseen machines hum occasionally behind the wall; here and there are closed, solid-looking doors, lettered in the local Athenian language, the words looking like bird tracks to Kirk. It is like a warren down here. Left to their own devices, they would likely never find their way out—or at least, not before blundering into the local soldiery.

Flynn, however, seems to know where he is going. He moves like a wraith down the hallway, his feet seeming barely to kiss the floor, his head constantly swiveling to watch everything around them.

At the second intersection with a red corridor, he flattens against the right wall and motions them to do likewise. He puts up a hand, palm out. *Stay here.* He slides along the wall slowly, silently.

Voices come from around the corner.

“I’ll give you five to one the Romulans and Klingons take the Feds,” one says. His voice is whiny, slimy-sounding. “I just hope they don’t try to take us.”

“Not bloody likely,” says another voice, this one deeper, full of braggadocio. “Nice ships and all, but our Javelins’ll make scrap metal out of them, no problem. Just like they will those Federation ships. I just wish they’d been deployed when those gutter-rats on the *Enterprise* attacked Defsat 3.”

Suddenly, Flynn is gone, a silent blur flowing around the corner like some deadly liquid. Kirk hears some noises, an aborted exclamation, another noise, then silence. He gathers himself to spring around the corner, but Flynn reappears carrying two phasers, tossing them jauntily in his hands. He pitches one to Kirk, keeps one for himself.

Rounding the corner and stepping over the (Kirk hopes) unconscious guards, they continue on their way.

“Flynn,” Kirk whispers, “this can’t be the way out—we’re going deeper into the building. What gives?”

“A communication center is on this level,” he whispers back. “We have to establish contact with the ships to coordinate beaming the scientists up. If all has gone well, Monty and company will by now have sprung them and are ready to blow up a shield generator to let the transporters

work. If *they* tried to communicate, Ocht's men might have time to localize the transmission and stop them. If we do it from here, Ocht won't know where they are till it's too late."

Kirk nods. *A good plan*, he thinks. Given the circumstances. But is it just him, or are things still going too well, too easily?

They stop at another corner. Flynn peers around the corner, then steps back and motions for Kirk to look. He mouths "communication center." It is guarded by two bored-looking security officers.

At any moment, Kirk expects one of the closed office doors behind him to open, then a shout, discovery.

Spock steps up to look. "How do we get past them?" he murmurs.

"Here's one way," Kirk says, stepping around the corner and firing. The guards crumple. Flynn nods approvingly.

The communications center is empty. Spock notices only one alarm sensor. He disables it easily.

Flynn slips into the one of the chairs before the panel. He is still triggered, and his hands fly over the console. Finally, he pushes a button and speaks.

"Monty, McCoy, Chekhov—ten seconds." He pushes another button. "*Excelsior, Enterprise*, this is Flynn. Begin beaming up personnel from the following coordinates, encryption key from your computer, codeword 'Frankenstein.' "

"Aye, Captain Flynn," Scott's voice replies after a few agonizing seconds. "Computer verifies your voiceprint and the coordinates are decoded. Awaiting shields to come down... They're down. Beginning transport now."

"Scotty," Kirk says, "Ship's status?"

"Captain! Am I ever glad t'hear your voice! She's sustained some minor damage, sir, but that's about it, an' we're managing to keep the unwanted guests at bay, though they're gettin' a mite short-tempered."

"Mr. Scott," Flynn says, "We must break contact. Beam the captain and Spock up from these coordinates immediately."

"I canna do that, Captain Flynn," he says. "Shields didna go down over your location."

Flynn swears under his breath.

"We'll manage, Scotty," Kirk says.

"Flynn out." He releases the button and stands. "We've done all we can here. Let's..."

The door flies open. Before even Flynn can react, Kirk whirls and kicks the phaser from a uniformed arm. His own phaser lies uselessly on the console across the room. He grasps the arm, pulls and kicks the face above it. The guard slumps to the floor.

Spock is pushed roughly aside by Flynn, a whirlwind erupting from the console seat. He grabs the next guard through the door and flings him bodily across the comm room to crumple against the far wall.

Then he and Kirk both stop stock still.

Across the corridor, leaning casually against it, is the old man from the cot in their cell. He has a phaser trained on them. He seems unconcerned with the fate of his two cohorts.

“Don’t even think about it,” he says to Flynn. “I’m just as fast as you are, boyo.”

Flynn stops and slowly relaxes, carefully stands still. The “old man” is an augment, now triggered; he can see that. They were allowed to escape, probably in the hope that they’d lead Ocht’s people to the rest of the resistance.

“I really wish you bastards would quit turning up,” he says. “Although it does save me the trouble of tracking you down. You’ll be the third one I’ve killed since landing.”

The other augment laughs. “I’m shaking in my boots, punk,” he mocks. “Maybe the boss’ll let me kill you nice and slow later. I *really* hope he’ll let me kill *you*, Vulcan,” he says to Spock. He rubs his shoulder. “How did you manage to knock me out so easily?”

Spock arches an eyebrow. “Vulcan trade secret,” he says.

“Smartasses, all of you,” the augment says, and shoots them.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

“Incoming!” shouts the helmsman, simultaneously sending *Excelsior* into a hard bank to port and a steep Z ascent. Even so, the photon torpedo grazes the edge of their shields. It skitters off without detonating.

Sulu breathes again. That was the second close call in the last hour. Mostly the “battle” has consisted of jockeying for position, with the Romulan and Klingon vessels standing between *Indomitable* and the planet to prevent a landing, but not engaging the Federation ships. Instead, they leave the harrying to the intrasystem fighters. None of the ships-of-the-line have actually fired on one another.

That is just a matter of time, Sulu knows.

Several of *Indomitable*’s fighters have been destroyed. Failsafe emergency transporters managed to get all but two of the pilots beamed out into space to be picked up by their comrades. *Enterprise* took another hit only a half-hour ago and is still assessing damage. The enemy fighter was vaporized by *Enterprise*’s phasers, but that was cold comfort. The torpedo got through.

Sulu sees in the viewer what he has been fearing for some time. The Romulan ship gracefully pirouettes and breaks orbit. Within two kilometers, its outlines waver, like he is viewing it through water into which a stone had been tossed. It vanishes.

“Now, Scotty!” Sulu shouts, but Scott has already reacted. Torpedo after torpedo leap from *Enterprise*’s primary hull toward the Klingon bird-of-prey, interspersed with phaser fire. “Now, Mr. Kao.” *Excelsior*’s phasers lance out as well.

“Keep a sharp lookout, Mr. Kao,” he tells his navigator/fire control officer. “That warbird has to decloak to fire, and I want all the warning time I can get. Mr. Scott, keep that bird-of-prey pinned down.”

“This beastie’s nae goin’ anywhere, Cap’n,” Scott says with satisfaction. In the viewer, the Klingon vessel is pitching slightly, and a ragged hole has opened in one side near the engines. The combined phaser fire overloaded one of its shields momentarily. “At least not cloaked.”

“Well done, Commander,” Sulu replies. He motions for Kao to cease fire. “One invisible bogey is enough to worry about. I’ll personally apologize to the Klingon High Command later if necessary.”

A klaxon sounds, simultaneously with a warning from Kao. “Warbird decloaking, 0 by 290 degrees!”

“I see her. Stand by...on my mark...”

“Disrupters powering up, captain!”

“Execute!”

*Excelsior* hangs in orbit, sleek and beautiful, with the menacing grey-green shape of the Romulan vessel swimming into existence beneath in it. The next instant, its space is occupied by a small canister. The ship has warped out.

Too late, the Romulan commander realizes what has been done to him, but before he can rescind his order, the ship’s disrupters fire on the spot where *Excelsior* had been, detonating the

mine. Matter and antimatter mix and a sphere of hell comes into being. But that is just the primer, the fuse that uses the disruptor's own field to rip a ephemeral hole in space-time, a gash that tunnels back up the disruptor's beam toward the Romulan ship's shields.

A few seconds later, *Excelsior* returns and is offering assistance to a severely-damaged warbird. Shield generators had not so much overloaded as detonated, breaching the warbird's hull in numerous places. The energy fed back through the power systems, causing an overload in the main reactor. Only quick thinking on the part of their engineering crew prevented the entire ship from blowing up. As it was, they had to eject their warp core, luckily away from the planet, where it exploded in an echo of the earlier blast.

"*Indomitable*," Sulu says, "prepare the landing parties. We can swat the rest of the intrasystem craft if they get in the way."

"Roger that, *Excelsior*," Smythe says in his clipped accent. "And might I say, brilliantly executed."

"Thank you, *Indomitable*."

"*Enterprise* to *Excelsior*."

"Yes, Uhura?"

"Commander Scott sends his compliments and asks that I tell you that we are beaming up the scientists now."

"Very good."

"Wait, Captain, here's Scotty now."

"Sulu, we got about half of them, but that's all. None of the *Enterprise* crew beamed up, though we've been in contact with the cap'n. They sabotaged a shield generator, but Ocht's crew must've fixed it doubletime." There is grudging admiration in the engineer's voice.

"Thanks, Scotty." For one brief moment, he thought that perhaps a miracle had been handed to him, that he wouldn't have to order ground action, action that will undoubtedly leave many good men and women, Federation and Athenian alike, dead.

He sighs. No miracles today. "Captain Smythe, proceed with the landing."

"Aye, Captain Sulu."

Without warning, the bridge lights wink out. Slowly, they are replaced by the eerie green strangeness of the bioluminescent emergency lights.

"What the hell was that?" Sulu shouts.

"Unknown, Captain." The science officer, a delicate Andoran named Kdeelan, peers into the hood of his computer station. "Damage reports coming in. The only damage is to our shield generators. We've been hit by something like a phaser from the planet's surface."

"Us, too, Sulu," Scott's voice says. "Blew through our shields like they were na' there, pinpointed our shield generators. The overloads took the mains off-line."

"*Indomitable*?"

"We were likewise hit, Captain. What the bloody hell is going on?"

"A warning shot," Sulu says.

“Aye, Captain,” Scott says, “that it was. Those were Javelin phasers, though I didna think they were ready to go just yet. If they wanted us dead, we’d be dead. I’m just glad they didna unlimber them when we engaged their satellite.”

“What now?” Smythe asks.

“I don’t know,” replies Sulu, rubbing his temples. “If we can pinpoint where those shots came from...”

“Captains, Scotty,” Uhura breaks in, “I’ve just received a message from the planetary governor to all ships.

“It’s...

“It’s an invitation to dinner.”

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

The scene in the building housing the city's shield generators can only be described as bedlam. One generator, a huge bottle-shaped thing reaching up through the structure's roof, still spews and sputters from the explosion, contributing more smoke to the already choking interior of the massive building. Multi-colored sparks fly from the gaping hole in its side into the melee that surrounds its base, here starting fires, there disappearing into a denser cloud of smoke like a child's sparkler tossed into a fog bank.

McCoy and O'Connor crouch behind the darkened remains of what were once control consoles. They are cut off from the rest of the sabotage party. That is, if any of the others are still alive and free. McCoy saw two students killed as they rushed a soldier, and one more was casually shot while trying to surrender.

"What now, Lieutenant?" he asks as a phaser bolt, apparently fired at random, evaporates a section of railing behind them.

"If we can, we stay here and quiet until all this sorts itself out," she yells back, her eyes scanning the scene.

There is little danger of being heard over the cacophony around them; "quiet" is a relative term.

"Then we either try to free some of the captives, or, if that's not possible, we carve a path out of here through the soldiers."

She notices him staring at her. "What's the matter, Doctor? Squeamish?"

"No," he says drily. "I'm afraid I was bending the hell out of my Hippocratic oath long before you were born, young lady. I'm just surprised that *you're* so casual about killing people."

"I'm a security officer."

"Since when does that give you a license to kill? I'm thinking maybe you've been around our blood-thirsty friend too long."

She frowns and turns away.

The racket seems to be dying down. Through the slowly clearing smoke, McCoy can see at least part of the extent of the damage they caused. Ineffectual as the student underground was, it is hard to *not* do a substantial amount of damage with modern shaped charges.

*If we'd only gotten that other generator before the cavalry got here*, he thinks ruefully. Maybe they'd given Monty and the others time enough to free the hostages. Maybe.

Around the corner of the console, he sees a soldier roughly cuff a student, sending blood flying in large drops from his mouth.

*But at what cost?*

He aches to retaliate.

The soldiers have begun the process of evacuating the building, shoving the few captives in front of them. Repair crews stand by outside, waiting to work on the damage. Soldiers are splitting up into teams now to sweep for any others.

"Get ready, Doctor," O'Connor hisses. She adjusts something on her phaser. McCoy is gratified to see that she has changed the setting from "kill" to "heavy stun."

She looks up, sheepish.

"'At a girl,'" he says, then motions toward the door. "Right behind you."

They almost make it.

The two soldiers heading their way crumple into a heap before they can even react, though the phaser's whine is sufficient to sound the alarm. McCoy pauses long enough to scoop up one of their rifles, then hurries after O'Connor.

She has run up against another soldier, a grizzled sargent. He bats her phaser from her hand before she can fire, then sneers at her, bringing up his weapon. She whirls, knocks his rifle away with wheel kick, taps the floor with that foot to kill momentum, roundhouse kicks him in the face. He crumples.

Another soldier appears out of the smoke ahead of her, holding a phaser. He looks at her smugly.

But only momentarily. McCoy shoots him. He disappears.

"Damn!" McCoy looks down at the phaser as if it were a traitor. "I should have *known* they'd be trying to kill us."

"Thanks," Jean shouts, retrieving her phaser.

A tall, wiry woman suddenly steps in front of them as they are almost to the door. McCoy tries to bring his weapon up to hit her with it, but she absently plucks it from his grasp, then brings it down on Jean's arm, forcing her to drop her phaser. He tries to punch her, simultaneously Jean aims a side-kick at her head. She blocks both of them at once.

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner," she says, casually slapping Jean with her open hand. Jean's head flies to the side, and she collapses to the floor. "I've missed all the fun!"

*Another damned one of them,* McCoy has time to think before she knocks him to the ground.

# Chapter Thirty

Giuseppe Ocht does not come from a long and aristocratic lineage, but when he wrested power from his predecessors who did, it pleased his vanity to keep their accoutrements of office. One of these was the Palace.

It really isn't a palace at all. Or rather, only part of it was a palace. It is extremely old, was old even in pre-Federation days. Tens of centuries ago, it started life as a rude stone fortress to keep one group of the pseudo-hominid indigenous beings from being killed by other groups. Eventually came peace, and in that peace it was expanded, becoming perhaps a temple of some sort, or a meeting hall.

By the time the first human colonists landed, the indigenous intelligent life was gone. No one knows what happened to them. The most likely explanation is that the Romulans or the Klingons either killed them all or took them as slaves. Life is often rough on a world near their borders.

The Palace, though, is still here.

The banquet hall is in an older, though not the oldest, part of the building, a section dating back centuries. Windows completely cover one end of large rectangular room, with deep burgundy drapes now pulled aside to give a view of the twinkling lights of University City in the valley overlooked by the Palace's eyrie. Dark wood paneling lines the walls.

Apparently Ocht has a taste for the ancient, for neither the chandeliers nor the wall sconces are electric. Instead, hundreds of real candles have been lit, their liquid glow reflecting richly from the walls' polished wood. In the center of the room is a long plain table, covered with fine white linen, silver, china, and crystal and lit by silver candelabras. Steam rises from heaping platters of meat and other food sitting there.

Reluctant guests line the table. The chair at the table's head is empty. To its left sits the Romulan captain Senak, then the Klingon K'Planak, Sulu, Smythe, and finally, McCoy. Down the other side sit Kirk, Flynn, Spock, Scott, and O'Connor.

Seven augmented guards stand at intervals around the table, three behind Flynn.

Ocht had first taken Flynn to his augment laboratories, stunning him several times along the way whenever he woke up. Ocht's augments had been designed to be deactivated by a hormonal trigger, a safeguard in case one went amok. Unfortunately for Ocht, neither the chemical that could pull the fangs from his own augments nor related hormones had any effect on Flynn. Unfortunately for Flynn, Ocht's technicians were good enough to realize it.

The Klingon and the Romulan are sullen. The planet-based Javelin phasers shot across their bows as well—thought not actually through their ships—warning them to take no action against their temporarily immobilized foes. Then they, too, were asked to dinner. The invitation, backed as it was by the tacit threat of a phaser their shields could not stop, was accepted, but not with the best of grace.

They protested the unprovoked (as they said) attacks on their ships as soon as the Federation prisoners and captains were brought in, and threatened retaliation by their governments. The other Federation officers deferred to Kirk, who dismissed the claims first with a brusque

suggestion to take it up with the Federation, then, when they did not desist, with an equally brusque suggestion of where they could put said claims.

“So tell me, Dr. McCoy,” Kirk says, deciding to break the tense silence that has fallen, “how did you and O’Connor manage to get caught?”

They were not allowed to talk en route to the banquet room, but the augments seem not to have any orders to stop them now. They stand silently now around the room, seemingly ignoring the “guests.” They look like bored, hyperactive cats.

“We blew up one of the shield generators, and I *think* we damaged the other one—in that building where they got you—then a bunch of Ocht’s goons stormed in. I gather that another team had taken a portable shield generator to where the scientists were being beamed out. Must’ve been strong enough to block transporters. Anyway, there was a fight where we were. We lost. Pretty simple.”

Kirk badly wants to ask about Monty, LaRue, and Chekhov, but knows better than to tip Ocht off if he does not already know about them. He hopes they escaped. After all, wouldn’t McCoy or O’Connor tell him if they were dead?

Flynn’s attempts to look relaxed and nonchalant are unconvincing. He is triggered, and that does not help. Neither did his reaction when O’Connor was led into the room. Kirk couldn’t help noticing his obvious relief when he first saw her, then the slight frown of worry, as if wondering how her presence would affect his plans—whatever they might be—for getting out of the mess they are in. For her part, she smiled and seemed glad to see him.

Was this, he wondered, the same woman who had fainted when she had first seen Flynn? What had happened while they were together on this mission?

All conversation stops as a door opens beyond the head of the table and a compact, balding man enters. His Excellency the Governor Giuseppe Ocht walks with an air of command between two of his augments to take his place at the head of the table.

Kirk has seen him before, of course, but only via the viewer. In person, and as close as Kirk is to him, he is quite different. For one thing, he is not livid at the moment. For another, the myriad minute scars were not visible in the viewer, due either to a trick of the light or, possibly, a filter. His face is covered with them, tiny lines that are barely visible unless they catch the light, making his face look like a finely-etched road map. Looking even more closely, Kirk notices that the lines seem not so much from cuts as from something punctate, like the man has had thousands of rashes, each of which scarred.

“Good evening, gentlemen, Lt. O’Connor,” he says. His voice is deeply resonant, pleasant and welcoming. A far cry from the hysterical dictator Kirk remembers from orbit, though there is still something, some hint of nervousness, perhaps, that suggests the man is on edge. “I am sorry we could not all get together for dinner without so much unpleasant preliminary squabbling.”

“You call attacking my ship ‘squabbling’?” Kirk demands.

“Please, Captain. You know very well that you provoked that incident deliberately to gain access to the defsat. There were good men and women on board that satellite, as good as any on

your ship, and you caused their deaths. Let's not be prissy. We're none of us innocent here. We all have blood on our hands."

Flynn has been studying Ocht intently since he came in.

"My God," he finally says, his voice heavy with both resignation and disgust, "you're an augment, too."

There are shocked looks around the table, and Kirk cannot stop himself from flinching slightly away from Ocht.

"Yes," Ocht says, smiling sadly. "Oh, don't worry," he says to Kirk, "I'm not 'triggered,' as your Mr. Flynn would say—I have to think clearly."

"You're quite right, Mr. Flynn, I am an augment. You and I share that affliction, though I'm afraid I'm not as advanced a model as my guards or you. You, I believe, are the Federation spy sent to assassinate me?"

"Assassination was not in my orders," Flynn replies.

"Not your written orders, perhaps. But don't tell me the contingency was not discussed."

Flynn does not answer.

This tacit admission, though not wholly unsuspected, shocks Kirk as much as anything has for a long time. The Federation, ordering an operative to assassinate someone, even as a last resort? Unthinkable! And yet, here was Flynn, the ultimate assassin.

"I thought that the augment you used as a model for your pets was me," Flynn says, "but I see now you could just use yourself. But where the hell did *you* come from?"

"Since it's important for you to know something of my situation in order for us to conduct business..."

"Business...!" begins Kirk, but Ocht puts up a restraining hand and continues.

"...I'll tell you something of what led to my current post.

"I had the dubious honor of being the former regime's first test of their bioengineering abilities, at least the first human test subject that lived. And you're partially right, they got the idea in the first place from files they had stolen from the Federation that discussed its augmented spy. I assume that was you, although that was an *awfully* long time ago."

"They weren't all that good. The scars Captain Kirk was so fascinated with a few minutes ago are from the viruses they used as vectors. And I'm probably not a match for you in a fight. But I was good enough to encourage them. They wanted to create a cadre of augments like me, agents they could use to further repress the people."

He frowns. "None of you know what the previous rulers of this planet were like. You effete Federation officers, you think my government's repressive? Ha! It's libertarian compared to its predecessor. Public executions almost every day, private assassinations and political killings by the secret police at night. 'Citizen' was synonymous with 'slave.' People were literally worked to death, children were taken from their families and put to hard labor in mines and factories."

He leans back and takes a deep breath to calm himself.

“I couldn’t bear the thought of the government having more like me, an even more effective weapon with which to repress the people. Since I was in the best position to do something, I did. I escaped and fomented a rebellion.”

O’Connor watches Flynn through this, wondering if possibly beneath his stoic exterior he is seeing a shadow of himself and his origins in Ocht’s words, is perhaps feeling at least a touch of pity or sympathy for the man. From the sound of it, they are, after all, similar creatures.

Except that whereas Flynn ran, Ocht changed the system. Was Flynn at base, then, a coward? Or was he afraid of precisely what happened to Ocht, that being in a position of power would cause him to do those things he hated in those who had created him? She hoped the latter.

“You were, I believe,” Spock says, “a very popular leader once.”

Ocht smiles bitterly. “Yes. Once. Public opinion is mercurial. Yesterday’s heroes are tomorrow’s villains, and I was a revolutionary hero. I overthrew the government, freed my people, and was made governor—not by a mere election, oh no, but by acclamation! And I wanted so very badly to reform Athena, to make it a paradise.” He toys with a knife. “Those were heady times.”

“What happened?” Kirk asks. “You’re the worst dictator in Federation space now. What caused you to become like your predecessors?”

Anger flickers in Ocht’s eyes, and he does not answer for a moment.

“Never, never accuse me of being like those bastards,” he finally says. “I’ve done a lot for my people—everything I’ve done, I’ve done for them. If our society is closed, if people aren’t doing as well as they ought, you have no further to look than your Federation to blame.”

“The Federation?” asks Spock, sounding, for him, extremely incredulous. “How can you say that an organization founded on the principles of democracy and justice has had anything to do with the current political climate on Athena—a climate, I might add, that the Federation has consistently tried to temper?”

“The Federation courted us—me—after the revolution, Mr. Spock. They promised aid, advice, a welcome into the community of civilized planets. I eagerly joined, even though the taxes, deferred for a few years as a gesture of good will, were more than our shattered economy could bear. And for a while, things went well. Aid and advice flowed, and I was able to rapidly improve my people’s living conditions.

“But not rapidly enough for your dear Federation. Free elections didn’t come as soon as they wanted. And our economy didn’t follow the path they outlined as closely as they liked. Then, Mr. Spock, then the aid dried up and we were left to fend for ourselves.”

“And why didn’t you hold elections?” Kirk asks.

“Because I *couldn’t*, Captain. I wanted to, I really did. But there was still a lot of the old regime’s power structure in place. I couldn’t get my reforms past them, and dissatisfaction was rising among my people. The aftermath of revolution is seldom pretty or easy, and my revolution was no different.

“Perhaps I had been an idealist—yes, me—even naïve. People were on the verge of starvation, and there was even nostalgia for the old days, when your children might be whisked away in the middle of the night, but at least you’d have a full belly. Naïve, maybe, but not stupid. Had

I held an election in that climate, I would have lost—and then where would my poor people have been? Lost, too, that's where. I'm the one who had, who has, the vision of where this planet should go. I have to protect them from themselves."

*Spoken like a true megalomaniac*, thinks Kirk. Aloud: "So why the repressive measures? Surely that would be anathema to a 'revolutionary hero.' "

"I suspect," says Spock, "that as has happened often throughout history, idealism met reality. Governor Ocht could not completely eradicate the old regime. Through popular dissatisfaction, he was forced to form a tacit—or possibly explicit—coalition with them. Even an enlightened despot is still a dictator. If he or she is threatened with a loss of power, then repression is generally the response, all, of course, in the name of the ultimate good of the people. It is even more likely when the dictator's allies are already experienced authoritarians."

"I'm afraid you're right, Mr. Spock," Ocht says ruefully. "I was, and am, trapped by my power base. All I really needed was more support from the Federation, and I could have turned my people around—all it would have taken was a better standard of living, and I would not have had to rely on those residual party cronies. Now, I'm reduced to this. Selling technological secrets to the highest bidder just to keep my planet's head above water. That, and leaving your Federation and its taxes, will give me the leverage I need to turn public opinion around. Then I can oust my 'allies' and lead my people to a better life."

"And your 'better life' is to be bought," Kirk asks angrily, "at the expense of the Federation citizens you're ready to sell into slavery?"

"Not to mention," McCoy adds, "starting a war between the Romulans, Klingons, and the Federation?"

"Captain," Ocht replies in a tired voice, "I never intended to sell the scientists and engineers. That was a ploy to get the Federation interested. They are merely hostages and will be returned to you at the conclusion of this whole affair. Despite what you might believe, I am not a barbarian."

"What?" demands K'Planak, and Senak gazes disdainfully at Ocht. Apparently such squeamishness does not meet with their approval.

"As for war, that is your concern, not mine. I don't particularly want to be the cause of millions of deaths among your peoples, but my first responsibility is *my* people. If your Federation had not contributed to me being in this predicament, none of this would have happened. You have brought it on yourselves."

"Governor Ocht," Spock says, "you cannot seriously have expected the Federation to help a dictatorship. While it is bound by its own laws from interfering in the internal affairs of member worlds"—several pairs of eyes involuntarily glance at Flynn—"it is not bound to support repressive regimes."

"What I cannot and do not expect," Ocht replies, "is that you agree with me. Nor does it matter." He gestures to liveried servants who stand unobtrusively against the walls. "Let's have our meal, and we can put aside political philosophy discussions and get down to business."

"And what business is that?" Kirk asks, though he already knows.

“Why, bidding, of course. You represent the Federation, my distinguished Romulan and Klingon guests represent their people. The highest bidder gets the specs for the Javelin phaser and the new shield technology, as well as some lesser plums. In return, we will be guaranteed neutrality and protection against aggression from the losers.”

“You don’t get out much, do you, Ocht?” Flynn laughs. The hard edge of triggering shows in his voice. “You can get all the promises you want, but the Federation is the only party that will keep them. The Romulans and Klingons will make promises to you, sure—but they’ll turn on you the moment your back is turned. They have no honor.”

“No honor!” K’Planak growls, rage twisting his face. “I have suffered my ship to be crippled by these Federation vermin, I have cooperated with the odious Romulans, I have watched our ambassador to this wretched ball of dirt die when a torpedo hit our ship, but *this* I will not tolerate! I will *not* have my honor insulted by a freak! Prepare to die, human!”

The Klingon lunges across the table as he says this, before the guard behind him can reach him, scooping up a carving knife as he goes. Flynn casually grabs his knife arm, stopping the massive Klingon. Pain shows on K’Planak’s face as he stares in amazement at Flynn. Flynn quickly pulls him to himself, then his other hand flashes out for the Klingon’s holster. Empty. With a grunt of disgust, Flynn releases his grip, then slaps the Klingon, sending him sprawling back into his chair to be caught by the augmented guard.

“Idiot,” Ocht says to K’Planak. “He can kill you with his bare hands without breaking a sweat. Don’t let his—or *my*—human form fool you! You are dealing with beings beyond your experience. And now you can see why I insisted you surrender your sidearm!”

There is a quick motion from Flynn, and the carving knife flies in a blur toward Ocht.

“Nice try,” Ocht grins, effortlessly catching it and throwing it back just as quickly to be caught by Flynn. “I may not be as fast as you, but I’m fast enough. I triggered when our stupid friend here attacked you, and now I think it might be a good idea if I stay this way. But don’t presume too much on my hospitality—remember that in this state it would not take much for me to order you all killed.”

Flynn shrugs and puts the knife down. “Worth a try,” he says, shaking off the two guards belatedly holding his shoulders.

“Now, who would like to make the first offer for his government?” Ocht asks, and the bargaining begins.

# Chapter Thirty-One

The bidding has been going on for a while. The Romulan and the Klingon were apparently empowered by their respective governments to conduct such business. It had never occurred to Flynn's superiors that he might have to *bargain* for the Federation's own property and knowledge; consequently, he was momentarily at a loss for how to proceed.

On the other hand, Kirk's superiors had apparently not been so sure that things would work out to the Federation's advantage. He entered into the bargaining as smoothly as if he had been haggling with a merchant for a particularly nice shirt.

*Or maybe he wasn't given authority to bargain*, Flynn thinks, hoping that Ocht is not thinking the same thing, or all would surely be lost.

Flynn should have been the one to improvise, he thinks. After all, he is the mission operative. But Kirk is the one instead who took a dangerous risk, hoping, probably, that the Federation would honor his pledges later, knowing that if they did not, or if they did but disapproved, his career would be over.

It stings Flynn more than he cares to admit to himself to watch Kirk. He sees now a vitality, a flexibility there that he missed before. One that he envies.

Without warning, the wall farthest from where Ocht sits explodes into dust with a noise like a pile of bricks falling off a truck. A blizzard of plaster and wood splinters momentarily fill that end of the room, then several figures emerge into view, crouching and holding weapons.

Montenegro, Chekhov, LaRue, and the students have arrived.

The guards are already moving, as are Flynn and Ocht, leaving the others at the table in momentary confusion. Flynn knocks the feet from under one of the guards behind him and kicks him in the face. Another guard tries to punch him, but he ducks, grabs her arm, and throws her across the room. The third hits him in the back hard enough to cause him to briefly wonder if his spine would snap. It doesn't, and he elbows where he thinks the man's sternum is. There is a satisfying crunch, and he feels his elbow sink in several inches. He knows the augment won't die for a few minutes, but it should slow him down.

Meanwhile, Montenegro has engaged an augment herself, and he sees LaRue shoot another with some sort of projectile weapon—the augment stares for a moment down at his bloody chest, then looks back up and starts toward LaRue, murder in his eyes. LaRue brings the weapon up, shoots him in the forehead. That does the trick.

Spock manages to trip another augment as he goes past toward Montenegro, earning himself a brutal punch. Surprisingly, he not only remains standing but delivers a blow that staggers the augment enough for Flynn to deliver a killing blow as he passes by. Then Spock collapses.

Though he applauds the effort, Flynn wishes that Monty had left the other Federation members somewhere else, or that she had just stunned everyone in the room, himself included, and sorted them all out later. As it is, the melee is destined to go against them. Five augments left, six counting Ocht, against two. Not a chance, especially since he and Monty will have to worry about the Federation people getting hurt, and the others won't have any such qualms.

He had hoped to shepherd Kirk and the others out of the way, to get them through the back wall so he and Monty could have a clear field, but the augments have other ideas. He sees one grab Smythe and, with a savage grin of joy, crush his neck. Kirk barely avoids the same fate, and McCoy and Scott have already been thrown against opposite walls, where they lie unconscious or dead. LaRue must have made the mistake of getting too close to an augment since he, too, lies in a boneless slump on the floor. The students are huddled against a wall with several of Ocht's servants, with Chekhov in a protective stance before them, facing the augment Flynn earlier threw across the room. She is laughing at Chekhov's impertinence of even trying to fight. Monty is still sparring with another.

The Klingon and Romulan captains have stood and are pressed against the wall, trying to avoid getting caught up in the fighting. Senak looks on with an almost Vulcan expression of interest, while K'Planak looks as if he is trying to decide whom he should attack.

Three augments separate Flynn from the others, and he is forced to fight them all. He is faster than any one separately, but together it is only a matter of time before he makes a mistake or tires. Then one will grab him while the others finish him off.

Apparently Kirk was not the only one to notice his earlier concern for O'Connor. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Ocht and yells a warning, but too late. Ocht grabs O'Connor from behind, pinning her arms with one hand and putting his other arm across her throat. She struggles briefly, but subsides as he applies pressure.

"Stop fighting, Flynn," he yells, his voice easily cutting through the battle, "or I kill your little friend here. Painfully..."

Something deep inside tells him to ignore Ocht, that whether O'Connor lives or dies does not matter, all that matters is the fight at hand, fighting and killing and winning. He recognizes it for what it is, the voice of the augmentation, his intimate enemy for a hundred years, subjugated but not vanquished.

"Don't believe me?" sneers Ocht. There is a strange, almost insane, light in his eyes. He looks like he hopes Flynn will keep fighting. "Then I'll show you."

He releases her throat, grabs her left arm just below the shoulder and twists. The sound of snapping bone carries across the room. She tries unsuccessfully not to scream.

"All right!" Flynn shouts, "You win, Ocht. Stop!"

Quickly, so the others do not kill him before they can see he has surrendered, he steps back three steps and puts his hands out before him, palms up. They grab him roughly.

"That was fun," Ocht says, and giggles, making Flynn feel as if something deformed and vile has crawled into the room. The man is lost in his augmentation, well beyond reason. Flynn knows the look, the feeling. "Maybe I'll just break another arm, then a couple of legs, then her neck..."

He shifts his grip again and grabs her other arm.

It seems to Flynn that for a moment the tableau before his horrified eyes is overlaid with a much older scene, he and Maria at the spaceport long ago, with the Company augments holding

him and torturing her to death while he was forced to watch. Now, as then, he is held too firmly to do anything to help.

He feels his cherished century-old control slipping, feels the bubbling cold rage boil over, feels conscious volition drop away as an unnecessary thing, an impediment to his being carried on the tide of rage.

Hormones surge into his body anew, hormones in a quantity more than he can ever remember feeling.

Deep within every human, every animal, are resources that can only be tapped in extreme situations, and even then, not always. Stories abound on most worlds about mothers lifting huge weights off pinned children, people after earthquakes pushing open doors blocked by more debris than a human could possibly shift. A hideous strength that does not care about what it does to its owner, but that, for a few moments at least, turns ordinary humans into augments.

These resources are still there in the basic human over which the augmentation has been laid, waiting for the right hormonal/neural key to unlock them.

His designers, were they to see him now, would be proud indeed. He becomes, in the space of seconds, the perfect killer, unencumbered by ethical scruples, conscious thought almost gone, totally goal directed. A machine.

The augment holding his right arm seems more surprised than hurt as Flynn effortlessly jerks his arm free. He smashes the man's face in with a backfist.

He is moving as much faster than them as they are than normal humans. He almost decapitates another guard with the edge of his hand, then the last one steps back, releasing him. Almost as an afterthought, Flynn grabs him and slams him onto the table, breaking his back; again, breaking his neck. Then he is moving toward Ocht.

As he passes between the remaining two augments, one holding Monty, one guarding Chekhov and the others, faster than even they can react, he casually punches them, one with each hand, in the throat hard enough to break their necks. Montenegro leaps back, as if she thinks she might be next.

Then he is upon Ocht. He rips the man's hands free of O'Connor, drawing another gasp of pain from her.

But he is beyond caring now. He is driven by hatred, and Ocht is his goal. He is not just an adversary, he is Sherry's murderer, Jean's tormentor, a surrogate for Flynn's long-dead creators, for Maria's killers. He slams him against the wall, holding him easily with one hand on his windpipe.

"Now," he grates into Ocht's face. Fear is an expression not often seen on an augment's face, and it is not pretty. But to Flynn, Ocht's terror is sweet, sustenance for his rage. "Now you die, you tinpot dictator. And you die slowly, for my friend Sherry."

He begins to squeeze. For all the good his struggling does, Ocht might as well be a normal human. He punches Flynn in the stomach hard enough to kill, but muscles like steel bands absorb the blow. Savage joy is in Flynn's face as the dictator's eyes begin to bulge.

“No!” It is O’Connor, leaning against the table on her good arm, her breath coming in ragged gasps. “Don’t do it, Flynn! You’ve captured him, that’s enough. You kill him, you’ll only add another murder to your conscience—I know you have a conscience when you’re not triggered. That’s all that’s kept me from killing you in your sleep!”

Kirk has picked himself up from where an augment left him and is standing across the table from her. “She’s right, Flynn,” he says through bleeding lips. “There’s no need to kill him. We’ll remove him from power, let the Federation—or Athena’s citizens—try him. That’s what we do in a civilized society, for God’s sake. You’re a Starfleet operative! Act like it! If you kill him now when he’s helpless, you’re no better than he is, nothing but a monster.”

Flynn looks from one to the other of them, though still keeping enough of his heightened attention on Ocht to tighten his grip when he tries to kick him.

“You don’t understand. None of you. He’s more dangerous than you realize. He can’t be allowed to live.”

“Why?” asks Montenegro, stepping up beside Flynn. She is still triggered, they can all see a belligerence, a killing lust in her face like a pale mirror of what Flynn has surrendered himself to. “Because he’s an augment? That it? He’s an augment, so he has to die. You’re the only one that can be trusted to live, Flynn? Well, what about me? When can I expect you to kill me?”

He grabs her by the neck with his free hand and slams her against the wall beside Ocht. It seems to be no more strain than if he were holding two rag dolls.

“When you get in my way, Montenegro,” he growls. “When you get in my way.”

He pushes her roughly aside and turns back to Ocht, who shrinks in fear from him, augment or not. “Now *you*, monster. Your turn.”

“No!” O’Connor screams again, seeing the imagined, unreasoning monster of her nightmares now in the flesh before her. “No!”

She is a trained security officer, broken arm or not, in the presence of a monster or not. It’s not the best weapon, but she doesn’t have time nor the presence of mind to look for a better one. She stoops and removes a heavy knife from the belt of a dead augment at her feet and throws it in one clean motion.

The knife buries itself in Flynn’s back between his shoulder blades. For a second, he remains where he is, still holding the other augment by his neck, feet barely touching the floor. Then he releases him and steps back. Ocht collapses on the floor clutching his neck.

Flynn’s movements are still fast, but now jerky, subtly uncoordinated, like a machine losing sync. He turns to face O’Connor, and in his face she sees many things. Surprise, outrage, betrayal.

She sees her own death, as clear as if it were written in her blood on his face.

He reaches behind him and pulls out the knife, hold it up in front of his face, staring at it curiously. It is bloody to the hilt. She watches, mesmerized, as drops, red and somehow obscene, drip slowly onto the floor.

*I did that*, she thinks, with dawning horror. *Oh, God, I did that.*

Time seems to have dilated. Slowly, she realizes how he must be built. His designers would not allow a mortal wound to *be* mortal until after the mission. He can probably go for a long time without a beating heart.

She is a dead woman. And for what? To spare a murderous dictator.

Their eyes lock, and she sees the truth of it, sees the cold hatred of every living thing dwelling deep within. He moves toward her, idly shoving Kirk aside as he tries to stop him. No trace of the uncoordination remains. For however long the oxygen stored in his brain's myoglobin-analog lasts, he is again a perfect killing machine.

Montenegro leaps at him to try to keep O'Connor safe, but he idly swats her to the ground, dazed.

O'Connor straightens, determined to meet her end with dignity at least, to face her childhood antagonist and at last be free of the memory of him.

He stops a few feet from her, looking at her as if suddenly in recognition, obviously struggling with himself.

"No," he chokes out, between clenched teeth, the surface manifestation of a hundred-year battle coming to a head. "No!" he screams in rage and pain.

He falls stiffly to his knees, horrible pain twisting his face. But also, there is relief there.

She runs to him, no longer caring if he kills her, and kneels beside him, putting her good arm around his shoulders and supporting him. No one else might know what happened, but she does.

The wound did not overcome him. She suspects that he could have remained mobile long enough, triggered and augmented as highly as he had been, not only to kill her but to stay alive while his body repaired itself. No. He consciously released himself from his augmentation, dropping back into the realm of mortality, trading his life for her life.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she says, almost wailing, "I'm so sorry."

He leans heavily against her, then collapses into her. She looks into his eyes and sees sanity again.

"No," he grates out, as if speaking is agony. "You were right to stop me. Besides, you owed me one."

He tries to smile, but instead coughs, a wet, unpleasant sound.

"Don't...don't let yourself feel guilty. I was about to do something I've spent a hundred years fighting. I had lost myself, I was about to kill unnecessarily again, in anger. I was about to *murder* for the Federation. You saved me from that. Saved the Federation from that. And I've been around too long anyway...it's time for me to go."

"Too bad, in a way, that I met you here at the end. I could have..."

He brings his hand up to caress her face, brushing away a tear. Then he closes his eyes, and she lowers him gently to the floor.

A few seconds later, his body disappears in a transporter effect.

"What the hell?" Kirk says, shocked by this from the grip of a feeling of being a spectator at a play.

“I would conjecture,” Spock says, his voice, for him, almost unsteady, “that his body has been transported back aboard his ship. Possibly a small implant, triggered by a flat EEG, that signals his ship. A logical mechanism to ensure that his body would not be found and analyzed by others.”

“Oh no you don’t,” Montenegro says, recovering enough to collar Ocht as he tries to flee. He struggles, but he was right. His creations, of which she is the sole survivor, are stronger than him. “I’ve been wanting to do this all my adult life.” She punches him into unconsciousness.

She nods in satisfaction as she looks down at him, then is shocked to her core. Here she stands, fully triggered, with her tormentor at her feet—alive.

Maybe Flynn passed something on to her after all.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

“So long, Sulu,” Kirk says to the face in the viewer. “Nice working with you again.”

The Federation-sponsored free elections are scheduled to take place in a week. *Excelsior* and *Indomitable* will remain in orbit, reinforced by two other starships that arrived yesterday, to supervise and ensure that there is no attempted coup by the deposed dictator’s party. *Enterprise* is leaving for much-needed repairs, taking Ocht back to stand trial.

The Romulan and Klingon ships limped off as soon as they could. There were no threats of any sort of reprisals, no posturing of any kind. When push comes to shove, Kirk suspects that neither really want war with the Federation any more than it wants war with them.

And possibly the demonstration of the new phaser—and of the abilities of augmented humans—would give them something to think about for a while.

Having seen augments in action, Kirk is taking no chances that Ocht will escape. He toyed with the idea of keeping him drugged, but gave that up as both unethical and impractical for an augment. He wishes that he knew what the hormonal deactivation key was, but he was unable to discover that from the remains of Ocht’s labs—the invasion had unfortunately started while the last fight was going on.

Instead, the prisoner is in the maximum security brig, guarded by four of the best security people aboard the ship as well as two unusual “guards”—robots that Scott rigged up that should be a match even for an augment. At least long enough for the guards to shoot him. Meanwhile, McCoy has been hard at work trying to find a replacement for the deactivation hormone.

“The pleasure is mine, Captain,” Sulu says, smiling. “My crew is convinced now that whenever we want some excitement, we should look you up.”

He smiles. “Look me up anytime. Kirk out.”

“*Bayou* standing by, Captain,” Uhura says.

“On screen.” Montenegro’s face appears. She has evidently decided to keep the changes she made on Athena. She is almost beautiful, and, for the first time since he has known her, she looks relaxed, even happy.

“We’re leaving now, Captain,” he says. “I wanted to say good-bye and thanks for your help.”

“I should thank you,” she says, smiling at him. “I can finally stop looking over my shoulder for Ocht’s assassins now, thanks to you getting me involved in all this.”

“So what’s next for you?” he asks. “Not to beat around the bush—you’re a wolf among sheep. I’m curious as to what you plan.”

“Why surely,” she says playfully, “you don’t think that one lonely augment can cause any trouble, do you?”

He smirks, and she laughs, an easy, happy sound.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” she says. “Once you filed your report, I got a call from Starfleet Command, wanting my services. I guess to replace Flynn.”

“And?”

"I told them to get lost, of course. I'm perfectly happy being a simple, honest freighter captain."

"Honest?" he grins.

"Well..." she replies, grinning. "Mostly. And if you don't look too close."

"We won't, Captain, we won't. Best of luck. Kirk out."

He wonders how the interim government will come together. Right now there is a Federation-installed governor pro temp, backed by a rather large contingent of Federation ground troops. The elected representatives will at first serve the governor in an advisory capacity. But soon, when Ocht's machinery has been cleared safely away, they will begin the business of drafting a constitution. There will be plenty of Federation help and advice, but in the end, it is the people who will have to take the reins of their own government.

From what he hears, Gustov Flahner has become surprisingly popular. Kirk has only met him a couple of times, and he seems okay. From what Chekhov and the others say, he grew up a lot during the time Flynn was on planet. Kirk wouldn't be surprised to see his name put forward, at least as a legislator.

Flynn. Kirk can't think about him without a pang of guilt. He supposes he didn't treat him particularly well, though he could plead provocation. Flynn was not a likeable sort. But still, he was honorable in his own way, and he did try to rescue Kirk and Spock. And, though he was loathe to admit it to himself, he owed him a rather personal debt.

It was from Flynn's personal log, read as duty demanded, but with distaste, after the spy's death, that Kirk got the biggest shock.

Apparently, Flynn had idolized him.

In the early entries, when Flynn had first come aboard, the disillusionment was plain to see, and painful. Seeing yourself through another's eyes is seldom pleasant, especially when what you see confirms what you suspect.

But if his nose was put of joint initially, as he read toward the abrupt end of the log when Flynn left the *Enterprise*, gradually his feelings were soothed. Though Flynn was spare in logging his emotions, it was clear that toward the end, he had come again to respect Kirk, even to see something new in him.

"I made a major mistake today," read a log entry from the day *Bayou* was boarded. "Yet Kirk managed to point it out to me without taking the opportunity to humiliate me that he have wanted so badly. He then went on to try to save the situation—no fault to him that it didn't work—and managed to stick up for Captain Montenegro to the limit allowed him by my bullying. I wouldn't have expected such behavior, either from the Kirk I had come to believe I knew, or, to my surprise, from the Kirk I had so long admired. It was an element of maturity that I've seldom seen. It has forced me think back over my observations of him, of how he captains his ship, of the loyalty he commands. He's a much bigger person than I had allowed myself to see, blinded as I was by my abhorrence for my own aging. I'm glad he's going to be here in orbit watching over me while I'm down there."

Kirk sighs. Watching over him, indeed. Some watcher he turned out to be.

But then, watching had never been his strong suit.

Still, he feels better about his age than he has in years. He may be getting older, but that isn't necessarily bad. It depends on what he makes of it.

"You know, Jim," McCoy says, coming up beside him, "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm really sorry that Flynn didn't make it."

"Why, Bones," he says, adopting a mocking tone. "Compassion for a spy?"

"Dammit, Jim, I'm a doctor, I'd feel that way about anybody to some extent. But I got to know him a little bit when we were running around playing junior revolutionary with those kids. He wasn't a bad sort, I don't think, at least not at heart. He was just trapped by what he was."

"Aren't we all, Doctor, aren't we all?" he says softly. He watches the planet turn in the viewscreen for a while.

"How's your groupie?" he asks finally.

"*Doctor Mendoza*," McCoy says sharply, "is doing fine, thank you very much. She is very happy to be heading back toward Earth."

When the shields went back up, she had helped a small group of scientists escape and had kept them safe while Montenegro and the others had attempted to rescue Kirk and Flynn.

"You're looking after her, I take it? Professional courtesy, all that?"

"Hmph." He can't help smiling, though. "As a matter of fact, I'm having dinner with her tonight. For once, Jim, *I* get the girl."

Kirk smiles. "Good for you, Bones, good for you. Helm, break orbit. Lay in a course for Starbase 14. Ahead warp factor two."

Montenegro left Holman in command on the bridge, as surly as ever, but momentarily subdued. He and the rest of her crew arrived yesterday on a small starship. *They* had had a relaxing shore leave, if you call boozing and sleeping relaxing, while she had been risking life and limb for the Federation.

He makes a kissing noise just after she signed off from talking to Kirk.

“Pretty chummy with the stuffed shirt, Cap’n,” he sneers. “Must’ve gotten to know him *real* well. Now we know why you look so different.”

They had ragged her for quite a while about her changed appearance when they had first come back aboard, accusing her of all manner of plastic surgery and liposuction.

She walks over to him and triggers. It is the first time she has dare to confront him triggered for fear of killing him. Now, she feels she can at least begin to control herself, and the man sorely needs a lesson in politeness.

“That,” she says softly, hoisting him effortlessly up over her head by his collar, “was no stuffed shirt.”

Despite his tough-guy demeanor, the color drains from his face, and he grabs her wrist to keep from strangling.

“That is one of the most honorable men I’ve ever met, though I wouldn’t expect you to respect that.

“Oh, and Holman—we’re going to start running this ship with a little more decorum. I’m the captain,” she says as if talking to a small child. “The rest of you are the officers and crew. Let’s start acting like it, shall we?” She gently sets him back down on deck, smooths his tunic, and pats him on top the head.

“You *really* don’t want to find out,” she says sweetly, “what the penalty is for insubordination.”

Holman actually shivers as he looked into her eyes.

“No, ma’am,” he says quietly.

She makes her way down the dingy corridors toward the main cargo bay. For the first time, she thinks that maybe she’ll have the crew clean the ship, make it presentable. Her adopted family won’t care one way or the other; it won’t increase profits. And the crew will grumble. But she feels now that she might make the ship into her home, a real home.

Or at least, a base of operations.

They dropped off all the cargo they had been carrying back when they’d established orbit, which now seems like a long, long time ago to her. Athena is in no shape to export anything at the moment, so no cargo was loaded.

Yet the cargo bay is not empty, even if one ignores the crates of Romulan ale and other contraband snuggled behind the false walls.

In the center of the bay is a very battered dart, a little ship that only two days ago made its cloaked way up from the depths of the ocean to orbit. Its onboard AI contacted Montenegro over a coded channel and asked for refuge and transport back deeper into Federation territory. It was

in no shape to play tag with any Klingon or Romulan ships still in the neighborhood. A large price was offered and accepted, and information was exchanged.

“Shelley,” Montenegro says, standing outside the ship. “Let me in, please.”

The door slides out and up, creaking slightly.

“Oh, my aching joints,” the computer mumbles, causing her to giggle nervously. She climbs the stairs and enters.

“You’re up and around!” she exclaims.

Flynn smiles weakly from his chair near the opposite wall of the little ship’s main compartment. Tubes snake from his body into a tank beside him. He was in that tank the last time she saw him, only yesterday.

“I’m not sure you’d call this being ‘up and around,’ but I’m doing better.”

“How’s the heart?”

“Regenerating nicely, thank you. Not a bad throw Jean made, considering the circumstances and the weapon.” He motions vaguely toward the shelf on which the knife sits. “I’m just glad you blew the shield generator on the way into the Palace, or I *would* be dead. Almost was anyway. Good thing we’re hard to kill.”

He looks pale and weak, and his voice sounds as if he is still in pain.

“Yeah, right,” she says. “But she almost did you in anyway.”

She looks at him closely, her expression guarded. “Quite a woman.”

“Yeah, quite a woman.”

He doesn’t notice her momentary frown. She looks down quickly and kicks idly at a cleaning robot that is brushing up against her foot.

“Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“I hope so.” He sighs. “I’ll look in on her from time to time, or rather, I’ll have someone do it. I can’t let her or the others know I survived. I have to be able to operate in secret.”

She remains carefully as she was, not letting any emotion show.

He toys with one of the tubes for a moment, not looking at her.

“Listen, Monty, about threatening you back there at the Palace...”

“Forget it,” she says. “If one augment can’t understand another one, well...”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I could ever hurt you,” he says, and she is a little embarrassed to feel her pulse speed up just the slightest bit. “Not even triggered. I don’t know what came over me.”

“That’s something I wanted to ask you, too. I’ve never seen anything like that. You were like some kind of robot.”

“I don’t know what that was. Some kind of overload, maybe. I pulled half the muscles and tendons in my body, felt like when woke up here. I don’t think I can do it on demand though, whatever it was. Though I suppose I should try.”

He looks up and smiles weakly. “Somewhere far away from anyone else, that is.”

“Yeah, well, for now, just concentrate of getting well, so I don’t have to carry you ashore when we get where we’re going.”

“So. We’ll be working together?”

“Looks like,” she says. “I didn’t tell them definitely yes, but I think I’m going to do it. Why should you have all the fun?”

“Yeah,” he says, smiling and flicking one of the tubes, “this is real fun.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch,” Shelley says, causing them both to laugh. “You think it was fun for me rescuing your butt, getting you into that tank, then getting up here, all by myself? I’m an AI, dammit, I’m not supposed to have to play human! And me all shot to hell to boot.”

“Yeah, well,” Montenegro says, “it’ll be fun working with you, too, Shelley.”

She turns to Flynn. “But promise me you won’t die again. I don’t think I could stand watching another time. And Shelley may not be around to ‘rescue your butt’ next time.”

She looks down, tries not to fidget. “I, uh...I kind of like you, you know.”

She is sure she is turning bright red, for all an augment’s vaunted biocontrol. She feels like a schoolgirl. But she is way out of her depth here.

He looks up at her, his face blank. Augments don’t form relationships; that much he remembers was drilled into him since his “childhood.” His whole life has reinforced that lesson. Life is too short and bloody for his kind and, more often than not, for those around them.

*But maybe*, he thinks from his vantage point of century or two of stacked years, *maybe that’s why you should let yourself love a little. Life is short.*

He finally smiles at her, a friendly, open smile.

“I’ll try not to, Monty. Who knows, I may even find some reason for living if I hang around you long enough.”

He holds out his hand, and she awkwardly takes it.

“Oh, Lord,” Shelley groans in disgust. “Biologicals...bah! Will you two kiss and get it over with? Then get off my ship, Monty, and leave my patient’s heart alone for a while, why don’t you?”

From her perspective, Shelley’s idea is not a bad one. She leans over and gently kisses Flynn. Apparently it is not such a bad idea from where he sits, either, at least to judge by the response.

“Get well,” she says finally, squeezing his hand, then hurries from the ship.

And maybe, just maybe, into a new life.

In her cabin, O’Connor puts down the pad she is reading and gazes thoughtfully at the ceiling. Kirk gave her a few days off. Mental health leave, he said with a gentle smile.

*And I need it, too*, she thinks. She had never killed anyone until stabbing Flynn in the back.

*Well, that was what it was, wasn’t it?* She knows intellectually that she did the only thing her self-respect would allow her to do. Flynn forgave her, they all forgave her.

*Why can’t I forgive me?*

It also doesn’t help that she had begun to like Flynn; to like him a great deal, as a matter of fact.

O’Connor sighs, dabs at her eyes with a tissue, and, against Doctor McCoy’s orders, tells the pad to show her her e-mail. She promises the stern image of McCoy in her head that she won’t read any messages that are work-related, only ones from friends.

She scans down the list of headers, several hundred of them. Most are departmental memos or

messages from mailing lists she's on that, now that *Enterprise* is communicating with the world again, have begun finding their way over the net to her. A few are from friends, and these she suddenly finds she has no heart for just yet.

Maybe McCoy was right, after all.

She is just about to tell the e-mail agent to go away when a message header catches her eye, down near the bottom. Its "From" line says "Frankenstein." No address after it, and no subject. And it is encrypted using her public key.

The agent has annotated it with: "Warning: No return path – possible forged message!"

With an odd feeling of mingled excitement and dread, she tells the agent to show her the message. It reads:

Jean,

Pardon the melodrama, but this seems like the best way to contact you, since we have no truly secure common code. As it was, I had to hack *Enterprise*'s computer to stick this message in.

To paraphrase an old author, the reports of our mutual friend's death have been greatly exaggerated. I whisked him away at the last second, and he's safe and mending. His kind are incredibly tough, though ornery.

So why am I, not him, sending this? Two reasons. First, he's still unconscious as I compose this. Second...well, if I know him—and I do—he will not be able to bring himself to do something so foolish and counter to his duty as to contact you. Better you think him dead, so there's no link left to him at all, and he can disappear. That's not to say that it won't torment him that he is letting you believe you killed him. As you began to see, on the inside, our friend is not as tough as he might like to believe.

So I'm saving him the trouble. I don't know about *your* creator, but mine was silly enough to give me free will, at least up to a point. At some opportune time in the future—when I think he's stewed enough—I'll tell him I sent this.

I'm afraid this is the last you'll ever hear of either of us. Don't think, though, that it's the last we'll hear of you. Think of us as distant guardian angels. (I'll leave you to fill in *whose* angels! )

It's been fun.

Your friend,

Shelley

P.S.: Don't bother trying to respond. A daemon process I snuck into *Enterprise*'s computer will tell me when you've read this, then it'll go away. I must dash off an anonymous memo to our Mr. Spock to tell him to beef up security. –S.

She stares at the message for a few minutes, unbelieving. No one apart from Mr. Spock could both know enough about Flynn and her and have the skill to forge it, and Spock is far from the practical joker type. And the letter has just the right tone, Shelley's tone.

Slowly, she allows herself to believe that she *didn't* kill Flynn, after all. She's sorry that she won't see him again, but maybe this is better. Killing the past, but without casualties.

She drifts off to sleep still clutching the pad, and after a little while, a sweet smile appears on her face.

There are no nightmares.