

*The tramway we boarded was three wagons long. We stepped into the leader and took seats near the door. Someone else who knew us slipped quietly into the last car and huddled against the small heater. She, too, had stood many hours in the street, waiting for my release from the ExComm, and watching her husband. Anatorr and I were so intent on each other that we did not see Lubeme as she stepped from the tram at the same time we emerged, scampering up the front steps and disappearing into my flat. She took up a position across the street and waited alone throughout a second frigid night.*

*When we stepped from my rooms and into the crisp morning air, Lubeme was standing near the door. I stiffened when I saw her and instinctively stepped behind Anatorr. She came up to him quickly and as if I was not standing there with her husband, as if we had not just emerged from spending the night together, she laid her hand on his arm. Her expression changed quickly from hurt to affection and then to bitter disappointment.*

*Lubeme looked at me and said very quietly, almost in a whisper, said, "Elena, I am glad the ExComm released you."*

*"Lubeme," I started, but she held up her hand and shook her head.*

*She looked back at Anatorr and said, "When word spread that Elena had been held for questioning, I followed you. I knew you would go to her. I have known for quite*

*some time. I waited all night at the Dom and all night here. I was afraid you would do something foolish, and you almost did. I do not know who that man was, but I saw you move toward him and I saw Elena stop you. I believe if you had advanced on him, he would have killed you. You also did not see Mitork. He arrived shortly after I did. He, too, is someone you should fear.”*

*“The man was ExComm, one of Elena’s interrogators,” Anatorr said, his tone of voice surprised me with its gentleness. After all he was standing in the street with his lover, confronted by his wife.*

*“You are wrong about Mitork,” I spoke up. “He has known about us almost from the beginning and has proven himself to be a faithful friend.”*

*Lubeme’s voice was harsh when she answered me.*

*“Think with your head, girl, and not your heart. Mitork’s face was full of jealousy as he watched the two of you. If that ExComm comes for you, you may be warned of his approach. Mitork will come offering the kiss of friendship, but he will be carrying the traitor’s bag.”*

*She turned to Anatorr, her voice now devoid of the compassion with which she had earlier addressed him.*

*“Anatorr, you take so many foolish chances. You think no one sees you. You think no one knows. Your heart is clouded by love for Elena. If I could have generated one small portion of the spark she has induced, you would never have left my side. I have tried not to blame her, because I know how convincing you can be, but she knew*

*we were married. I tried to excuse you because she is so young and so very beautiful, but you are so deliberate in everything you do – this is something you wanted very much.”*

*Her body trembled and her eyes became moist, but she shook the emotion off and continued, “I want you back. My heart is as full of love for you as is hers. My bed is as open to you as it ever was. Come home to me, Anatorr. We can begin again.”*

*And then she started to cry. She made no sound, but her eyes brimmed with tears and then the moisture spilled down her face, like flood waters breaching an earthen dam.*

*Before Anatorr could respond, Lubeme spoke again, her voice now pleading.*

*“Elena, give him back to me. You can have any man on Resenka, but I have only Anatorr. Who would want a woman whose hair is streaked with white and whose body grows heavy with age and is lined with the marks of the years? Give my husband back to me.”*

*She turned back to stare at Anatorr. Moments passed and then she said, “Anatorr. Please come home.”*

*“No, Lubeme. I cannot. I am sorry, truly sorry. But I intend to stay with Elena.”*

*In that moment, Lubeme seemed to age a century. The spark went out of her eyes and her shoulders slumped. She turned and silently walked away. Deep inside of me, I knew the time would come when I would do as Lubeme had asked. Anatorr*

*would not wish it, but at that moment I knew that someday I would have no other choice.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The last phaser was finally drained. The *Isaac Newton's* power levels had been raised to 89 percent. It was as much as could be hoped for under the circumstances. Ship's diagnostics indicated that engineering, propulsion and life-support were all on line and functioning properly. It would be possible to reach and maintain orbit. With luck, the engines might be able to generate escape velocity. And it would be possible to generate a signal which would aid the *Enterprise* in her search.

Captain Kirk put the last of the empty phasers away and walked forward to the command console. He pushed a button and began speaking.

"Captain's Log, supplemental. I would feel more satisfaction at the achievements of the last few hours, if Bakor K'Yle, Jackson Shelton and Berek were here. But in their own ways, each has made it possible for me to attempt lift-off. I have copied all of my log entries from my tricorder into the *Isaac Newton's* memory banks. I have placed a copy of a unique diary there as well. These musings of a young Resenka woman named Elena are important to her world. I believe that they will be a major addition to Federation archives as well. Baring all but the most violent destruction of my shuttlecraft, these messages will be safe.

"I am going to wait until it is completely dark before I fly out of Oracle Cave and into planetary orbit. By delaying my departure until then it will be possible to help Obolen look for his brother. I have decided to allow Obolen to keep a pair of

communicators and my tricorder. It is a small gesture, but by establishing triangulation, he should be able to discover where Gernet is being held prisoner. To leave these devices may put me in violation of some Starfleet regulation, but it is the least I can do. Without their help, I might not have survived my stay on Resenka.

“Captain, out.”

Kirk turned to Obolen who was seated in the co-pilot’s chair.

“I am going to move us to the front of the cave. This deep underground, and surrounded by whatever unique minerals Resenka’s soil contains, I will still be unable to use my sensors. But I do not want to run the risk of being barricaded inside.”

Kirk made the necessary adjustments and his readouts showed maneuvering capabilities. He increased lift and the shuttlecraft silently rose from the dusty floor. Within seconds the ship had crossed the main room. Kirk decreased the lift and allowed the *Newton* to stop several meters from the cave’s mouth, close enough to maneuver for a quick exit, but still within the shadows of the interior.

“Obolen, I have adjusted the frequency of your communicators to make it possible for you to complete your search for Gernet. Who among the Others can you trust with this communicator?” Kirk asked.

“Maff. The man who loaned us his jalop.”

“Then the two of you position yourselves on what you believe to be opposite sides of the place where Gernet is being held. Switch on the tricorder, activate your communicator and signal Maff. I have set these two for standard voice activation. When Maff answers, push the red button and turn the switch just below it. As soon as

you've done that, tell him to do the same. The two communicators will send a signal to the one Gernet had. Their signal will be strong enough, so that wherever he is in Zenyuk, it will be reached.

"Unless he has escaped, Gernet will obviously not be in possession of his communicator. Whoever has it will hear the signal and, I hope, open it. When that happens, the center button, the clear one, will light. Push it and turn the switch one more position to the right. When you hear the signal change pitch, lock the switch in that position. The grid which I've preset on the tricorder will automatically triangulate the location of Gernet's communicator. The rest will be up to you."

"It will be enough, James."

"I hope so. I would do more if I could."

The two men sat silently in the shuttlecraft, each alone with his thoughts. They watched the sky turn dark, the color of the sunset finally fading from crimson to violet and then to black. As they waited they consumed another meal from their emergency supplies. Kirk had developed an appreciation for the sweet sausage. He replaced Obolen's meager reserves with rations from his own stores. At first Obolen refused to accept the containers, but when the Captain pointed out that it might be some time before Obolen would be able to provide his own foodstuffs, the leader of the Others agreed to take the gift. Kirk added tablets to make purified drinking water and a stock of bandages. Obolen loaded them into his carry-bag, he would accept nothing else.

After they had eaten, Kirk asked, "How did you discover the escape tunnel?"

“The tunnel is actually part of a network of tunnels and caves,” Obolen explained. “The most prominent section is Oracle Cave. Many years before the bolt-house was built, our father and some other young men were hunting Keelork in the fields above. They chased one into its hole and when they searched for the animal’s nest, they found the entrance to the tunnel. Later, our father purchased the ground and built his house above the tunnel. He set up a system of fans to pull the flow of cool air into the building. It provided natural ventilation during the hot season when the Sower dominates Resenka.”

Jim replied, “An inventive man, your father. My chief engineer would enjoy knowing him.”

“He disappeared in the yachenka, James. Ten years later we still do not know his fate,” Obolen said. “We also lost our mother in that arrest. Not all at once, you understand, but she was never the same woman again. She just went to sleep one night and did not awaken. Father was her reason for living.

“Our story is repeated all over Resenka. I once met Veenameen, a Keeper from a small city north of here. His entire family – his parents, his companion, and his two children – were sent to the yachenka in an attempt to silence his opposition. They got word out to him, encouraging him to continue resisting the Bolskars in spite of their confinement.

“Keeper Veenameen is a tall, gaunt man. His face is drawn, his eyes are deep set, and when you look into them, it is as if you are seeing uncounted tenners of

Bolskar terror. But the man never allows you to dwell on his suffering. He is constantly extending compassion to others.”

“Is he a part of the Others?” Kirk asked.

“No, but many of us have drawn strength from his quiet dignity. And now it is time to go. Adzeva has slipped to the other side of our world.”

Kirk nodded agreement and brought the *Isaac Newton* to full power. He gently raised the ship and headed for the cave’s entrance. As the shuttlecraft cleared the mouth of Oracle Cave, the craft was bathed in brilliant light. A Bolskar patrol had set up positions in the trees just beyond the clearing and were beginning an advance toward the Newton.

“Mitork!” Obolen exclaimed. “His treachery is complete.”

“And that’s not all,” Kirk added. “Look at the edge of the clearing just to the right of the brightest concentration of lights. Unless I am very wrong, that is a Vargon ship.”

“I have seen such vehicles before. It is definitely from Vargon,” Obolen said.

Just then a tall man, dressed in body armor swaggered into the light. Jet black haired fell to his shoulders. His red eyes glared out from under a pronounced brow ridge. An energy weapon dangled from one hand. With the other, he raised a voice projector to his lips.

“Earth Man!” the Vargon roared. “Organ Moss-Kuib has been most displeased by your absence. He intends to introduce you to our Sovereign and then the Organ will personally rip your heart from your body.”

Kirk opened a channel to the ship's speakers and said, "Aireb, I had hoped never to see your ugly face again. And in case you have forgotten, my name is James Tiberius Kirk!"

"You know this creature, James?" Obolen asked.

"We've met, and believe me, I have no desire to get reacquainted. Hold onto your seat."

Obolen grasped his hands around the seat of his chair and it was a good thing he accepted Captain Kirk's words literally. Kirk instantly accelerated to climbing speed and the *Isaac Newton* shot upwards and out of the clearing.

Aireb dropped the projector and said to the air where the shuttlecraft disappeared, "You will not escape me again, Earth Man."

\* \* \* \* \*

As soon as Kirk had accelerated out of sight, he rolled the shuttlecraft over and reversed his course, flying back to the vicinity of the cave.

"Are you crazy, James?" Obolen asked, his voice filled with disbelief. "Are you returning to attack? Does this vessel have weapons?"

"No, to all three. But if I am right, their sensors will be just as confused this close to the ground as mine are. They will be looking for us along our take-off vector. I am angling back in a wide loop so we can avoid running into anyone who starts out in immediate pursuit. As soon as I think we have successfully hidden ourselves from them, I will drop you off close to the city."

"Is such a delay wise?"

“Probably not, but otherwise, you’ll have a long walk back.”

Kirk flew the *Isaac Newton* as close to the ground as was reasonably prudent. He was navigating by the seat of his standard issue trousers, an experience he would have found enjoyable under different circumstances. Ship’s sensors would clear for a moment and then scramble again as they flew over magnetic rock formations. As it was, he had to quickly accelerate upward to avoid crashing into a large rock outcropping that suddenly appeared in front of them. The Captain’s flying skills did not impress Obolen. He merely held on for dear life and kept his eyes tightly closed.

“Obolen is a brave man,” Kirk thought. “A lesser person would be crying out with fright.”

“Where do you want me to set you down?” Kirk asked as he leveled the ship and stopped it over an area of intense sensor distortion. Kirk felt safe for the moment, but he knew he was pressing his luck.

“I need a few things from my house. The ExComm will already have been there, certainly, and they will probably not expect me to return.”

“Elena’s Diary!” Kirk exclaimed.

“Unless they have completely dismantled my house, it is safe. I have hiding places I do not think even your devices could locate. At any rate, it is safely stored within the tricorder. It is not the same as holding the actual pages, but it will do.”

“I feel the same. Back on Earth, all books are now produced for computer use. I still prefer the old fashioned pages and bindings.”

“That diary is our last physical link to Elena. I will retrieve it as soon as I can. But first, I need to contact Maff.”

“Will you do that by wire-comm?”

“Under normal circumstances, yes, but I am afraid that the Bolskars might be listening. I do not think they yet suspect Maff, but I cannot take the chance with his life.”

“You use coded signals, don’t you?” Kirk asked.

“We do, but if they are listening, they could recognize my voice.”

Kirk punched a series of buttons on the control panel and then said, “Will you contact Maff by using the wire-comm?”

“James, I already told you that would be unwise,” Obolen said, his confusion at Kirk’s repetition showing.

The Captain smiled and held up his hand. He touched two more buttons and from the rear of the shuttlecraft, a decidedly feminine voice said, “Will you contact Maff by using the wire-comm?” And it was answered by a voice which sounded like the grinding gears of some long rusted machine, “James, I already told you that would be unwise.”

Obolen whirled around at the sound and then turned back to Kirk, his face smiling in recognition.

“That would have fooled my own mother, James.”

“When I was a boy, I used a similar device to fool mine,” Kirk said, and smiled at the memory.

Kirk pointed at the panel and said, "Enter Maff's wire-comm signal here. The shuttlecraft will do the rest."

Obolen did as he was told and Kirk activated the signal. Seconds later a very sleepy voice came over the speakers. Obolen said, "Maff, meet me at Section 20. And hurry."

"Who is this?" the speakers asked.

"Hurry, Maff. Condition is critical. This is for Elena," Obolen said, giving a coded response. He nodded at Kirk who closed the circuits.

"What voice did he hear?" Obolen asked.

"A voice that would make grown men weak," Kirk grinned.

"Maff will surely be disappointed when he sees a balding, old carpenter step out of the shadows. Now, take me home, James."

\* \* \* \* \*

On the way back to the small village where Obolen lived, Kirk told his friend that he was going to quickly raise the shuttlecraft high above the planet's surface in order to do a sensor sweep. Then he would descend rapidly and steeply to cut their possible time of exposure. When he landed, Obolen would need to exit immediately. The landing site was completely exposed and there would be no time for hesitation. Obolen gathered his carry-bag and hefted it over one shoulder. He draped the tricorder across his chest, stuffed the communicators into his pocket, and nodded his readiness.

Kirk accelerated to near orbit and activated the ship's sensors at their maximum setting. He told Obolen that he could see no convoy of vehicles, nor any large

congregations of people. As much as he could trust the readings, the area was clear. Kirk then pitched the nose of the *Isaac Newton* down and descended rapidly through the clouds. He lifted the nose at the last moment, cut power and let the craft settle gently in an open field. Kirk opened the shuttle's doors and Obolen stepped outside.

Kirk turned to look at his friend, at once both fearful of his chances and confident of the man's success. Kirk shook his head at the confusing image and waved, "Good luck, Obolen. I hope we meet again."

"As do I, James Kirk. I will ask the Holy Ones to watch over you." And he quickly slipped into the darkness.

Kirk looked through the doorway for a moment and then closed it. He rotated the ship through 360 degrees and saw Obolen disappear into the trees. He reset the controls and quickly accelerated toward orbit.

\* \* \* \* \*

Captain James T. Kirk breathed a sigh of relief as his shuttlecraft raced through the last, lingering stratus cloud, through the last wisps of Resenka's atmosphere and into the cold, blackness of space. He checked his power levels and nodded to himself in satisfaction, still more than 80 percent. It would be enough to achieve escape velocity and angle back towards Federation space.

Suddenly an alarm sounded. Kirk automatically glanced at the life-support readings and saw no abnormalities. Scanning to the right, he realized the warning was a proximity indicator. He adjusted the screen so sensors would give a wide-angle outside of the ship and saw three approaching blips. Two smaller ones were coming

from behind one of Resenka's moons. A third, and much larger blip was racing from orbit on the far side of the planet.

Kirk nodded his head in understanding. He had flown into a trap. Instead of wasting their time chasing him around on Resenka's surface, the Vargons had simply returned to orbit and waited, knowing he would surface sooner or later. Kirk muttered, "I should have seen it coming."

He quickly calculated a flight plan that would take him out of orbit and swing him around Resenka's sun, using Adzeva's gravitational forces to help him increase speed. It would not be like using the warp engines of the *Enterprise*, but the maneuver could surprise the Vargons. It would certainly be the fastest way out of the system.

As the *Isaac Newton* sprang forward, angling towards Adzeva, Kirk slid a small hatch open on the panel and reached inside for a familiar, but unauthorized button – Scotty's emergency signal. He set communicator settings at maximum, yawed the ship slightly for proper alignment and switched the communicator on. A very satisfying green light showed the device was working properly.

Jim broadcast a concise message and then set the transmitter to automatic repeat. Without warning the intercom crackled and Aireb's deep, menacing voice said, "We have accommodations waiting for you, Earth Man. Admittedly the *Vindicator* is not as luxurious as the *Repelator*, but you will find your quarters to be most satisfactory."

Kirk immediately switched the computer off and began manual maneuvering. The move caused the first shot from the closest Vargon craft to miss. The Captain

banked to port, to starboard, and then finally back to port. He angled back toward the planet as an energy beam streaked in front of him and he dove steeply down. He quickly changed his descent and the shuttle skipped off of Resenka's upper atmosphere and back towards deep space.

"Just like skipping stones across the farm pond back home," he said with satisfaction.

The maneuver caught the Vargons by surprise and Kirk began to put some distance between himself and his pursuers. Then three phaser bolts flashed past the *Newton* in rapid succession. A fourth struck the starboard propulsion pod, knocking it off-line. The port pod's acceleration caused the shuttlecraft to spin violently around its horizontal axis. Kirk quickly toggled maneuvering thrusters to stop his spin. Escape velocity would be impossible to achieve with only one engine.

The Captain stood up and secured the ship's logs under his personal security code and reached for the emergency transmitter to send another message. Before he could complete the gesture, James Kirk heard the familiar whine of a transporter beam and the *Isaac Newton* disappeared from his vision.

*About four weeks after our confrontation with Lubeme, Anatorr and I made our last trip to Ingal-Karbe. It did not, of course, start out to be our last trip. I went one more time after that, I do not know if Anatorr ever went again.*

*There was nothing that either of us could have pointed to, no explicit happenings to mark the change in our relationship, but in the days after I had looked into Lubeme's face as she fought to regain her husband, a subtle distance grew between Anatorr and me. Our times together were as enjoyable as they had ever been and the times we were apart were just as empty, just as lonely. But something had changed.*

*The day following our discovery by Lubeme, Anatorr asked if he could move his things into my flat, making it finally and truly, our flat. I still cannot believe my answer. I told him, "No."*

*My exact words were, "Anatorr, I love you more today than I have ever loved you. Tomorrow I will love you more than that. But I cannot erase the pain in Lubeme's eyes from my memory. She knows that you are gone from her, but we cannot seal that separation just yet. More than anything else in this world, I want to wake up in your arms every morning, but something deep inside of me says, not yet. Lubeme must release you. Until she does, you will never be completely mine."*

*"And am I to tell her that? Am I to give her a hope that does not exist?" Anatorr asked.*

*"I do not know what you will tell her. I only know what I feel. Anatorr, one of the things that loving you has done for me is to make me more aware of the Holy Ones. Maybe that is a violent contradiction, but you, yourself, have remarked about how much you enjoy reading *The Words* with me, how much you enjoy attending the serkor with me. My conclusion may be in opposition to Their teachings, but I believe that the Holy Ones brought us together. And I believe that in Their time, They will seal us as one."*

*That final trip to Ingal-Karbe started much like any other. Anatorr had withdrawn some money from our "bank," that small container in his desk at the store where we kept the elbur we spent on ourselves. He purchased tickets for a premier berth on the train. When we entered our quarters I immediately saw a long, low table set against the far wall. On it were two chasha-vaza filled with the pale yellow blooms of Jassica. I walked into the sleeping compartment and saw a single perfect red Posy positioned in the center of the bed.*

*I do not know how he arranged to have the blossoms in our compartment. I do not know how much extra he had to spend to provide that added surprise. But if he had purchased the broach made of ninety-nine perfect tabersk stones which had adorned the coronation dresses of the Ryssart's wife for seven centuries, it could not have been as beautiful as those blooms.*

*I held Anatorr tightly for a long time and then I peeled myself from his arms and slipped into the bathing compartment, taking my dressing-case with me. I emerged in a few minutes wearing a new gown I had bought just for the occasion.*

*Anatorr smiled that smile which covered his entire face and whispered, "Oh my! You've been shopping again!"*

*"I take that look as a sign of your approval," I purred.*

*"Elena, you are so beautiful," he said, moving the Posy from the bed and pulling back the covers. When Adzeva's early morning glow spilled through the sleeping-room window we were still entwined in each other's arms. The motion of the train slowing to enter the station awakened us. We were awakened once again, and several hours later, by the cleaning lady banging on our door. Her shrill voice pierced through the solid walls and locked doors and announced that she had work which could not be accomplished as long as we were inside. We bathed and dressed as quickly as we could and left our compartment, accompanied by the old woman's harrumphs. As we passed her, she smiled at me and winked. I was so surprised by the gesture that I walked back to her and gave her the long-stemmed Posy.*

*The old crone blushed and said, "Hang on to him, dearie. He will always make you happy."*

*Oh, how I wish I could have done as she advised!*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

*First Officer's Log: Stardate 5929.1*

We are now slightly more than three days away from our arrival at the Pleiades Cluster. Without the engineering modifications which were accomplished by Mr. Scott and his team we would still be weeks away. In all of this time there has been no signal of any kind from Captain Kirk. I am understandably concerned.

We will soon be within scanning range of the Alycone system. We determined weeks ago that the logical choices for a search would be Alycone III and Alycone IV, with Alycone III most likely because of their advanced state of technology.

Upon our initial approach into the system we will keep Alycone between us and the two planets. Our approach vector will be on the same level as the galactic plane, therefore, we should be able to enter the system unobserved.

The engines show definite signs of the strain of running them at Warp 11 for such a sustained period of time. In spite of what we have accomplished, it may not be possible to effectively translate this technology for commonplace use by the Federation. The crystalline structure of our dilithium has been altered by the forces associated with the high energy in the warp field. In addition, Mr. Scott has found it necessary to develop a new computer program which attempts to calibrate for the precise tuning necessary to maintain the higher level of warp. Always one to err on the side of caution, especially where the *Enterprise* is concerned, the Engineer's mounting

apprehension is a definite reason for caution. Without the modifications, however, we would never have reached this point, this quickly. That certainly would have placed our rescue mission in jeopardy.

\* \* \* \* \*

The meeting had been going on for almost an hour and it seemed that they were no closer to a solution than when they first walked into the conference room.

Lieutenant Sulu was the first member of the team to voice that opinion.

“Mr. Spock, Mr. Scott, Doctor McCoy, we’ve been over this data a hundred times and it still comes out the same way. If we are going to have any warp power left at all, we are going to have to secure from Warp 11 soon.”

In a characteristic Vulcan reply, Mr. Spock corrected the young lieutenant. “We have only ‘been over’ the data four times. This rehearsal is our fifth time. But you are correct. All analyses indicates we are developing engine trouble that not even Mr. Scott will be able to correct. We may be running out of, I believe the Captain would refer to it as, miracles.”

“I’m forced to agree with you Mr. Spock,” Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott said, “about the data that is, not about my ability to care for my bairns.”

“I did not mean to give offense, Engineer,” Spock replied, “but not even you can alter the laws of physics.”

“Aye, Mr. Spock. No offense taken. It’s just that I dinna like to give up.”

“Nor do I, Mr. Scott, but the situation requires that we change our course of action.”

“Aye. You’re the Commander, Mr. Spock. Give the order.”

“Secure from Warp 11, Mr. Scott.”

Without another word to the members of the conference team, Scotty signaled the bridge.

“Mr. DeSalle, reduce speed. Keep us steady on Warp 8.”

Disappointment was evident in the Ensign’s crisp reply. “Coming to Warp 8, sir.”

At almost the same instant that the hum of the ship’s engines changed pitch, signaling a decrease in warp speed, the *Enterprise* experienced a sudden, hard vibration. It lasted less than two seconds, but even as the vibration ceased, red warning lights flashed all over the ship and emergency klaxons uttered their shrill alarms.

“Mr. Scott, proceed to engineering at once,” Spock said, then signaling the bridge, he continued, “Mr. DeSalle, report!”

“Our modifications to the emergency release controls have failed. It will not be possible to return to Warp 11. We should be all right, at least until the last two dilithium crystals shatter.”

For the first time in several minutes, Doctor Leonard McCoy spoke.

“Vince, what do you mean, ‘the last two?’”

“The shutter that we all felt, Doctor, was the crystal in chamber three shattering. We have only two chambers on line and one of them is showing irreparable stress. But that’s not all.”

“How much more bad news do you have, DeSalle?” McCoy barked.

“Oh, nothing too serious, Doctor. Just the announcement that the change from Warp 11 to Warp 8 means our speed has decreased by more than fifty percent. That adds almost two full days to our arrival at the Cluster.”

McCoy leaned towards Mr. Spock and started to say something. Then he slumped back in his seat, defeat evident in his countenance.

“Doctor, there really is nothing we can do to change the time factor,” Spock said, the tone of his voice was appeasing.

“I know, Spock. I know. It’s just that I’m not sure how many more disappointments we can take. Some of the crew are already speculating that we’ll never find Jim and the others alive.”

Lieutenant Nyota Uhura’s excited voice broke in over the intercom.

“Mr. Spock! Doctor McCoy! We have a signal incoming from the Pleiades Cluster! It’s from Captain Kirk! He’s alive!”

\* \* \* \* \*

At that moment, James T. Kirk might have questioned his communications officer’s assessment of his condition. The fact that he was breathing was not debatable. That he was in any human sense, living, was problematical. As soon as his molecules and atoms had reformed from the Vargon transporter room, he had been captured by three “executioners” and savagely beaten. This time, Jim felt, they were going to pull out all the stops. If help did not come soon, he knew he would not survive.

Security Chief Aireb had supervised the process and had personally administered much of the torture inflicted on the Captain. The only respite they gave

him was to be certain that he would not die from his wounds. Skilled medical personnel saw to that, halting the process long enough to repair basic damage and then allowing the execution to proceed. The sophisticated torture of his weeks on the *Repelator* were gone. Savage brutality was at hand.

And still they refused to call the Captain by his name. It was as if they knew this might be a crack in his otherwise, impenetrable armor. It was the last concrete shred of his existence to which he could cling, and if he could succeed in getting even one of them to call him by his name, they would fail. Nothing short of death would then be able to break this man.

“Earth Man,” Aireb hissed, “you are completely alone. Your companions are all dead. You will find no wood carvers on this vessel to assist your pathetic efforts to hide from us.”

“So,” Kirk said through swollen lips, “you know more about Obolen and Gernet than I suspected. I hope Mitork was well paid for his treachery.”

“He was, Earth Man. Not that it will continue to profit him. My agents have signaled me that members of the resistance movement have captured him. He will certainly not survive.”

“And what about Obolen?” Kirk asked. “Is he still free?”

“It is touching, this concern for your friends, but you may wish to save all of your compassion for yourself. It will be all you receive.”

With that Aireb motioned to an executioner and the punishment began again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Organ Moss-Kuib was deep in the combined effects of the beverage, proklinat, and the attentions of Myahkee when the signal came in from the command center of the Battle Dock. The word was patched to his quarters on the *Repelator* as the enormous ship rested in its docking bay. Moss-Kuib had been looking through the viewport at the world below. From its synchronous orbit above Vargon, the Battle Dock was always above Gulikovell, the world's capital city. Moss-Kuib always believed he would some day move into the Sovereign's Palace. He knew that such privileges had always been granted only to those who had been born to the position. With the recapture of the Earth Man, he felt sure of gaining even more strength with other military commanders in the Vargon Sovereignty. It was only a matter of time, he knew, until he would be able to claim the title of "Sovereign" and ascend to the throne.

Moss-Kuib reacted violently to the news that the Earth Man's vessel had not been recovered as well. Evidently the Earth Man had set the controls of his ship to direct a reentry into Resenka's atmosphere. Before Aireb's assistant, Bandera, realized what was happening, the *Isaac Newton* had plunged back towards the planet. Bandera did not live long enough to know that he had not, truly, failed. Moss-Kuib's rage exploded and Bandera dissolved screaming, his body vaporized by disruptor fire.

In reality, the *Newton's* trajectory was the result of Captain Kirk's final "stone-skipping" maneuver. Jim had calculated the trajectory to loop his ship away from the *Vindicator* and into high planetary orbit around Resenka. He hoped his tiny craft would escape destruction and alert any rescuers to his presence.

Moss-Kuib shook off the effects of the proklinat long enough to warn Aireb that he wanted to speak with the Earth Man when the *Vindicator* reached the Battle Dock. His only restrictions as to “interrogation” was to be sure the human could talk when he reached the Sovereign. Aireb gave his personal assurance of compliance and then promptly vaporized two executioners, just to make his point.

Moss-Kuib switched off his communicator and staggered back to Myahkee. With a gentleness that belied his usual ferocity, Moss-Kuib held Myahkee’s hand and turned it palm up. Drawing her wrist to his face, he touched her flower bracelet and inhaled deeply of its fragrance.

“Tell me again what you call these flowers, Soft One,” Moss-Kuib demanded.

“They are called ‘pahodja.’”

“Tell me again why you wear them.”

“They are from my home-world, a gift I received long ago from an old woman. Besides, they are all you allow me to wear.”

“If they covered more than your wrist, I would not allow you to wear them. Seeing your flesh has a pleasing effect on me.”

“The fact that my naked flesh has a disconcerting effect on everyone else who sees me is also pleasing to you.”

Moss-Kuib lowered his brow-ridge into a frown. Considering the effects of the proklinat and his facial structure, that was not a difficult maneuver. He had been about to say something, but now he could not remember what it was.

“What were we just discussing, Soft One?” Moss-Kuib asked. “I so easily lose my thoughts when I am with you.”

“Thank you for that compliment. We were discussing my naked flesh and you were smelling the pahodja,” she said, pushing her wrist back into his face.

“Yes, yes,” he said, his voice thickening, “now I remember.”

As Organ Moss-Kuib pulled Myahkee into his grasp, she once again said a silent prayer to the Holy Ones, thanking them that her mother had been right about the effects of the flowers.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Vulcan Science Officer reacted to Lieutenant Uhura’s news in a very unVulcan-like manner. He folded his hands, steeped his index and middle fingers, and raised one eye brow. When that single eyebrow reached its highest point, almost touching his black hair which lay in a perfectly straight line across his forehead, he smiled.

“Indeed, Lieutenant,” Spock said, his voice almost drowned out by the excited voices in the conference room, “would you please transfer that message down here?”

The voice which came over the speaker was slightly distorted at first because of the distance which the subspace message had crossed. Lieutenant Uhura quickly boosted the gain on her communications board and the clear, resonate voice of their Captain filled the room.

“This is Captain James T. Kirk of the *Federation Starship Enterprise*. I am transmitting from the shuttlecraft, *Isaac Newton*. I was kidnaped weeks ago by a race of beings who call themselves ‘Vargons.’ They kept me prisoner on their ship, the *Repelator*. I am at this moment being pursued by three Vargon ships, so my escape is problematical. Lock onto these coordinates and bring help. Kirk out.”

The feeling of relief in the conference room was almost real enough to be handled. Dr. McCoy turned to Spock and with a smile that covered his face, said, “Spock, that is the most satisfying thing I’ve heard since the morning I heard my daughter’s voice for the first time in the hospital delivery room!”

“While I was not present for the birth of Joanna,” Spock said, his mask of Vulcan dignity now firmly in place once more, “I must agree that hearing the Captain’s voice after all this time is a most gratifying experience – even though he is evidently still in some difficulty.”

Before McCoy could start something, Spock signaled Uhura and said, “Lieutenant, I believe that the rest of the crew would like to hear that message. Open a ship-wide channel and I will make the announcement.”

As the sound of Jim Kirk’s voice flashed around the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, the crew filled the rooms and corridors of the Federation’s flagship with shouts of joy.

After a few moments, Spock again opened the intraship channel.

“This is the First Officer. We have been forced by power restraints to secure from Warp 11. While Mr. Scott and his engineering team continue their fine tuning to

the engines, you need to know that we are still 4.872 days away from the area where the Captain's signal originated. In addition to our decreased speed, we have two additional problems with which we will soon be forced to deal. In less than five days we will confront a race of beings whose capabilities are unknown to us. To say that they are inclined to friendship would be a misstatement of the gravest sort, based on their treatment of Captain Kirk and his trainees. Secondly, I must remind you, that there is a Romulan Warbird somewhere behind us. And we know that their purposes are not amicable. I will, therefore, need each of you to be at top efficiency when we enter the Pleiades Cluster. It may be your personal contribution which will make the rescue operation succeed smoothly. Prepare well. Spock out."

Spock leaned forward, gathered his data tapes and stood up.

"Doctor. Mr. Sulu. I suggest we return to our primary duty stations."

The navigator retrieved his tapes and headed for the nearest turbolift. Doctor McCoy waited until Sulu was out of earshot.

"Spock," McCoy asked, the decidedly "Southern gentleman" tone in his voice was a certain indication he was about to begin a verbal fencing match with the Vulcan, "do you suppose we could convince the Romulans to help us, if, they are, in fact, still following somewhere behind us?"

Before Commander Spock could reply, the Doctor pushed on, "Cooperation between the Federation and the Romulan Empire. Now that would be a horse of a different color."

“An interesting hyperbole, Doctor McCoy,” Spock said, “I remember that expression from *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Spock, you are full of surprises. I didn’t know you read children’s literature.”

“Doctor McCoy, I have studied most of the Terran classics. The imagination of L. Frank Baum made him one of your greatest writers, even though he is still, three centuries later, regarded largely as a writer of juvenile fiction. The skill required to captivate the minds of children ranks with the accomplishments of William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Tom Clancey of Earth, S’torip of Vulcan, Levot Keysarius of Antos IV...”

“Stop!” McCoy interrupted. “I get the picture.”

“Did I say anything about holographic photography, Doctor?”

The Vulcan stepped through the doors of the conference room and into the corridor beyond. He looked back to see Leonard McCoy looking up at the ceiling, shaking his head slowly from side to side. Spock turned and strode to the turbolift, fighting a smile which was already dancing in his eyes.

In the conference room, Doctor McCoy said, “Maybe one of these days I’ll learn. Blasted pointed-eared Vulcan! He can be glad we heard from Jim, or I’d...”

McCoy couldn’t keep up the indignation. Hearing from Jim was just too good to allow anything, even losing an argument with Spock to spoil. He dropped into the closest chair, threw his head back and laughed until tears were rolling down his cheeks.

*We left the train, walked to the end of the platform and hailed a takzee. When we were seated in the rear of the vehicle, Anatorr said, "Driver, take us to the kafe which serves the finest breakfast in the city. My Princess and I have not eaten since early last evening and we are famished."*

*The driver nodded, turned on the fare-meter and pulled away. He glanced at the mirror to look through the rear weather-glass as we merged into traffic. Several times in rapid succession he checked the mirror and then spoke over his shoulder to us.*

*"Do you have friends in the city?" he asked.*

*"Yes," Anatorr said, "why do you ask?"*

*"Friends in uniform, who drive an official vehicle?" the driver continued.*

*Anatorr immediately turned around to see what the man was indicating. I followed his gaze and saw an ordinary black jalop signal and turn from the main roadway.*

*"I guess it was nothing," the driver said. Then he switched off the meter and said, "But if you don't mind, I'll take a longer route than normal to a special kafe."*

*Anatorr slid across the seat and turned so that he, too, could watch behind us. I sat where I had been, but I huddled into myself, my arms wrapped around my chest, my heart racing as fast as the day Zalygin interrogated me about the papers missing from*

*Levaki's office. I reached over and gripped Anatorr's arm fiercely and stared straight ahead.*

*Finally, the takzee stopped on a street busy with the morning's commerce. Street vendors were already taking up positions on the pavement beside of us. Two small boys raced between pedestrians in an elaborate game of tag. Their innocent behavior caused me to relax, in spite of my earlier fear. The driver nodded to Anatorr and said, "Have you seen anything?"*

*"Nothing that causes me alarm," Anatorr replied.*

*The driver turned to face me and said, "I am sorry if I caused you uneasiness. But my brother and his wife disappeared into the yachenka and now I am always afraid."*

*"Do not apologize," I answered. "I have met the ExComm. Every citizen of Resenka lives in fear."*

*He smiled sadly and then tipped his cap as Anatorr paid the fare, adding something extra for our new friend. Anatorr opened the door and waited for me on the street. As I slid across to join him, the driver said, "You will find other friends in that kafe," emphasizing the word "other." We understood his meaning.*

*A long, tattered green canopy jutted out over the sidewalk, protecting the door of the kafe. That canopy, the building to which it was attached, indeed, all of the area surrounding us, had seen better days. In the early times of Ingal-Karbe, I thought, this must have been the most special place to come. At the far end of the street I could*

*catch a glimpse of Elissa's Garden. The lodgings where Anatorr and I always stayed were not far from this place, and yet, until a few moments ago, we had not known it existed.*

*The takzee pulled away and I grabbed Anatorr by the hand and pulled him across the street. We did not see the black jalop parked around the corner and away from the curb, until we were in the middle of the street.*

*I stumbled, but Anatorr smiled and said, "It is nothing. There are hundreds of jalops just like that one in this city. Besides, spending the night with you makes me very hungry."*

*As we stepped out of the street, I pulled Anatorr to a stop under the green canopy and shamelessly asked, "What are you hungry for most, right at this moment?"*

*He threw back his head and laughed. It was a loud, satisfied sound that caused people to look at us.*

*"I am twenty-four years older than you, Princess. An old man needs solid nourishment if he is expected to attempt to satisfy unquenchable lust," he said, his voice stern, but his eyes full of laughter.*

*"Then I hope their kitchen is well stocked. You will need all your strength," I said and pulled him into the kafe.*

*As we walked through the doors, a familiar voice said, "I wondered if you two were going to come in here, or just attack each other in the street. Have you no dignity?"*

*“Dadush,” I squealed with delight and rushed to the old Keeper. It was definitely not a proper greeting for a Keeper of the serkor, but I hugged him firmly and then kissed him on his cheek, causing him to blush and stammer, “Now I know you have lost your mind, Elena. But thank you for the kiss, just the same.”*

*Lared was seated opposite Dadush and for once he did not look at me with his usual expression of disapproval. Instead he smiled pleasantly, stood and pulled out a chair for me. I could not resist the tease and so I said, “Dadush, I believe your noveechok is learning manners. Perhaps he will soon attract a woman to his side.”*

*Again Lared surprised me. His smile changed only slightly as he said, “Elena, I once loved a woman who was as sassy as you. But she thought the life of a Keeper dull and unexciting. She went to Megin to seek her destiny. Are you sure you do not have a sister?”*

*“If I did, Keeper Lared,” I said, “I would introduce her to you.”*

*None of us noticed the change in Dadush’s expression. When he spoke, it caused our laughter to die.*

*“My friends, there is danger in the street.”*

*We all looked immediately towards the kafe’s wide front weather-glass as three men entered and took a table against the far inside wall. One, I did not know, but the other two I recognized at once – Zalygin and Genrikh. And it seemed as if my heart stopped beating.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The scene around him was vaguely familiar. It looked like Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. He looked across the room and saw himself in the mirror. His reflection caused him to frown, something was not quite right. He was 19 years old, and dressed in the uniform of a Starfleet Cadet. James Kirk smiled. This was his first trip to the notorious Pleasure Planet. He had determined to see for himself if all of the rumors were true. And so far, everything seemed to be as reported.

The women were the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen. The very skimpy garments which they wore seemed to cling to their extraordinary curves, just begging for the slightest breeze to expose the joys hidden underneath. Everywhere Jim Kirk looked there was another woman, each one more beautiful than the last, and each one signaling that she wanted him. It was almost more than a boy fresh from the farmlands of Iowa could stand.

He winked at a long-legged redhead. She wore a garment which seemed to be just a piece of thin cinnamon-colored cloth draped around her shoulders. It fell to the floor and swept out behind her as she walked to him. Jim staggered, swallowed hard and leaned up against the bar.

"Bar Keep," he stammered, "Antarean brandy. Quick."

Without looking back, Jim reached for the tall, thin glass and whipped it around to his lips. He drained its fiery contents in one deep gulp and sat the glass back down.

"Another," he ordered.

When a second glass was slow in coming, he roared, "Bar Keep, you'll get no tip from me if your service continues to be this slow!"

He turned to the man standing behind the bar and felt all the air escape from his lungs. The bartender was his father, George Samuel Kirk.

"No," Jim whispered, "this is not the way it happened. My father was never here. He was lost on a deep space mission before I joined the Academy. The bartender that day was a fat blue Carpathian whose third arm had been lost in combat, a duel of honor he told me."

He looked back to the redhead and saw her face dissolve, literally dissolve, the skin peeling back to expose the stark, white bones beneath it. He dropped to his knees and buried his face in his hands. When he opened his eyes again, he was kneeling in the dust on the same world where he had once fought the Captain of the Gorn ship. He spun quickly and heard the lispig breath of the creature as he lumbered forward, a rock raised over his head, ready to crash down on Kirk's skull.

Instead of dodging and rolling away as he had once done, he lay still and closed his eyes to accept the death blow. When it did not come he opened his eyes and found he was staring into the face of Organ Moss-Kuib.

"Earth Man, I remember your boast that one day I would fear your name," Moss-Kuib sneered. "The newborn whelp of a groyskorth would cause me more anxiety."

James T. Kirk knew that he was losing. The Vargons had inflicted more pain on him than he would ever have imagined a human being could stand. When their beatings took him to the point of death, a healer was called in and soon the

executioners would begin again. This time they did not bother with The Chamber. Real-time execution was sufficient. They intended Kirk to be taken before the Sovereign where the ruler of the Vargons would be given the pleasure of the final blow.

The worst thing for Kirk was the hallucinations. The pain in his body had been removed by the healers, but the accumulation of the endless hours were beginning to affect his mind.

“My name is James T. Kirk, you knob-headed freak!” the Captain of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* spit, every word causing his bruised and bleeding face to throb.

The blow Moss-Kuib delivered, landed not on the Captain’s battered face, but in his stomach. Unprepared for the blow, Kirk felt as if he would collapse into unconsciousness. The relief would be welcome, but he was determined to fight as long as he could.

Spock is out there, he thought. He and Bones will be here soon. I must hold on.

“Repair him,” Moss-Kuib ordered, “and then bring him to my private chamber.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Moss-Kuib was standing in front of the Sovereign’s shrine when Kirk was brought into the room. The Captain’s body ached, all over, but the damaged tissue and bones had been completely restored. He shook off the hand of the Vargon healer who accompanied him into the room. His feet shuffled slightly instead of the confident stride with which Jim Kirk had marched through the corridors of his starship, but at least he was moving under his own power.

“Earth Man, you are the most interesting specimen I have ever seen,” Moss-Kuib said. “Most beings would have died by now. Your death will bring great pleasure to the Sovereign.”

“The possibilities of my death have been greatly overrated by creatures slimier than you,” Kirk said.

Moss-Kuib spun around and barked at the two healers standing behind Kirk. “If the Earth Man speaks his name, cut out his tongue and then vaporize it with your disruptor. I will not hear those words again.”

The Captain squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height. It was not a beaten prisoner who stood before the Organ of Vargon. It was the commander of a starship. Defiantly and precisely he spoke. “You can cut my tongue out, Moss-Kuib. Your Sovereign may get the chance to kill me, but my name will haunt your sleep. And in case you’ve forgotten, it’s Kirk! James Kirk!”

“Seize him!” Moss-Kuib roared, and before Kirk could move, his arms were pinned by a healer whose strength far outmatched his own.

“Bring the knife to me,” Moss-Kuib demanded. “I am going to enjoy this.”

From far back in the darkness of the room, Jim Kirk heard a voice which sounded like sunlight dancing on a flawless, white diamond. It was decidedly soft and feminine, and at its expression, all movement in the room stopped.

“Before you do that, Excellency,” the voice spoke, “may I converse with him? We might find that what he would say to me would cause you amusement.”

Kirk turned quickly towards the voice, but his eyes could not penetrate the darkness beyond.

“Yes,” Moss-Kuib said, “that might be interesting indeed. Healers, leave us.”

The two Vargons bowed deeply and without a word, left the Organ’s private quarters.

“Lights, level one,” Moss-Kuib barked and illumination panels filled the room with a faint pink glow.

Across the room Kirk saw a low table and against the far wall, a seating platform. Crystal drinking vessels, filled to within millimeters of their rims with a rich, amber liquid, were positioned in the exact center of the table. Opposite the seating area was what looked to Kirk like a command chair and beyond that, a view screen. A darkened corridor off to his left, drew the Captain’s attention. The voice came from that hallway.

“Sit, Earth Man,” Moss-Kuib said, sweeping his hand toward the platform. When Kirk hesitated, the Organ spoke again, his voice low and menacing, “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“This is not a good time to antagonize him,” Kirk thought to himself, and walked stiffly to where Moss-Kuib pointed. The seating platform was luxuriously padded, Kirk realized as he lowered himself onto it. As he relaxed, he thought, “Sitting on an old-fashioned sofa never felt this good.”

“I am glad you have finally agreed to cooperate, Earth Man,” Moss-Kuib said.

“We have an expression: ‘Discretion is the better part of valor.’ I once met a Klingon who told me, ‘Only a fool fights in a burning house.’” Kirk said evenly.

If Kirk's answers were important to the Vargon, he did not show it. Instead he pointed at the table and said, "The beverage is called proklinat," indicating the crystal goblets. "It is the second strongest stimulant known. Try it."

"If this is second, what is the first?" Kirk asked, the old insolence in the face of death, the old challenge returning to his words.

"Myahkee," Moss-Kuib replied.

The word had no meaning for James Kirk. His face showed his confusion.

"You have courage, Earth Man. I may allow you to experience that stimulation, too. Just once, before you die."

Kirk picked up the goblet closest to him and drank deeply from the contents, immediately regretting his approach to the liquid. It seemed as if a phaser set on maximum ignited in his throat and tore down into his stomach. He fought to maintain control and was almost successful, only the moistness in his eyes giving his discomfort away.

"I should have warned you about that," Moss-Kuib laughed, as always enjoying Kirk's distress.

Kirk fought for breath and then said, "My Chief Engineer would call this stuff 'soda pop.'"

"You are determined to die before you meet the Sovereign, Earth Man," Moss-Kuib said, "but I promised someone she could speak with you."

The Organ turned toward the dark corridor and said, "Myahkee, attend me."

The reputation of James T. Kirk as a ladies man was legendary. The dashing good looks, the soft brown hair, the hazel eyes, the irresistible charm, had melted the resolve of many a female among the citizenry of the United Federation of Planets. Romances, sometimes brief, sometimes meant to last but somehow never fulfilling the promise, could have given a balladeer from Old Earth material for more songs than a dozen men could have sung. But the woman who stepped into the soft light of Moss-Kuib's private quarters caused Jim Kirk's heart to feel as if it had stopped.

Her blonde hair was a golden color, the color of Typerian apples. Her eyes were green, so vivid in color that they seemed to dance between a dozen verdant shades, but always settling back to a rich emerald intensity. And of course, she was completely naked, except for a bracelet of tiny flowers which wrapped gently around her wrist. James Kirk fought the impulse to scan her body with his eyes, but from her position across the room, his gaze immediately encompassed all of her.

Kirk opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come out. For no particular reason that he could understand, his first thought was, "Bones would appreciate this. Me, speechless in front of a woman."

Myahkee seemed to glide across the room. Her every movement was sensual, but it was natural, not projected from artifice or guile. When she reached the seating platform she bowed her head slightly and said, "I am Myahkee. I am told you are called 'Earth Man.'"

Not waiting for Kirk to speak, she took the empty crystal goblet from his hand and refilled it from the tall carafe. She handed it back to him and knelt behind the low

table. When she had settled herself on her knees, she reached for one of the two remaining crystals, raised it to her lips and drained its contents in one long swallow. Then she refilled it and sat it in front of her.

Finally Kirk spoke. He was angry and his voice was devoid of all restraint. "Who are you trying to embarrass, Moss-Kuib, me or her? Bring her a garment!"

"I prefer her dressed like this, and so does she. Don't you, Soft One?"

"I prefer that which pleases you, Excellency," Myahkee said. If there was untruth in her voice, Kirk could not hear it.

"Come to me, Soft One," Moss-Kuib said, his voice surprised Kirk, it was modulated and gentle.

The only way for Myahkee to join the Organ was to walk directly in front of Kirk. Surprised at his embarrassment, the Captain turned his face away from her. As she passed, he caught a curious fragrance from the flowery bracelet and for the slightest instant, his mind was blank. He shook himself as though suddenly exposed once again to the wintery cold of Resenka, and then the feeling was gone.

Moss-Kuib activated an unseen comm-button and a Vargon executioner entered from the corridor and marched into the room, stopping smartly, six paces from the seating platform. That he saw Myahkee was obvious. That he appreciated what he saw was betrayed by the smile which spread across his mottled tan face. That he was unnerved by what he saw was immediately evident as he snapped to attention and said, or tried to say, "I am at your command, Organ."

Kirk looked at Moss-Kuib and said, "You are enjoying our discomfort, you bastard. Torture me. Kill me. But don't you have any decency?"

"No," Moss-Kuib replied evenly, "I do not. And as to your suggestion as to your disposition, I will do both."

He turned to the executioner and said, "Take him to the detention level and put him in the ak-borok. Set the force field for the tightest possible confinement. I want him to suffer at his slightest movement. Make the duration four cycles."

Without a word, the executioner crossed the open space between his position and the platform, seized Kirk roughly by the shoulders and yanked him to his feet. Before the Captain could respond, the executioner placed a control collar around Kirk's neck and switched it on. The pain level was just enough to convince the Captain that resistance would deprive him of strength he would soon need. As he was dragged from the room, James Kirk turned back and smiled at Myahkee. His expression was a silent articulation of sympathy and compassion. There was nothing more he could do.

*"We need to go now," I said to Anatorr, fighting the panic which was rising in my throat. "Those men are ExComm. Two of them are from Zenyuk, they are the ones who interrogated me about Levaki's missing papers. Our presence here is endangering Dadush and Lared."*

*Anatorr stood at once and put his hand on my shoulder, stepping between me and the ExComm. Before I could rise, Lared said, "Since they know you, it is too late for discrete movements."*

*He looked at Dadush and an unspoken signal passed between them.*

*"Please stay and finish your chai," Dadush urged and we hesitantly took our seats once more.*

*Lared reached for his inside jacket pocket and withdrew a small white envelope. Opening it, he allowed the white powder it contained to drop into his chai. He quickly stirred the liquid until all of the powder dissolved. Then he turned the mug up and drained its contents. He crumpled the envelope and rolled it into a small ball which he mixed in with the remnants of his breakfast. He stirred the lumpy mass of congealed grain pudding until the tiny ball was completely hidden.*

*Suddenly Lared's face darkened and his breath became short, ragged gasps. From somewhere deep inside of the man, Lared uttered a tormented scream. He*

*staggered to his feet, clutched at his throat and crashed to the floor, upsetting the adjacent table as he fell.*

*Completely unnerved by Lared's sudden collapse, I screamed again and again. Anatorr and Dadush rushed to his side. As soon as I could control my voice, I ran to the kafe's proprietor and shouted, "The Keeper! Something is wrong! Send for healers!"*

*Anatorr was kneeling beside of Lared, running his fingers through the unconscious Keeper's mouth.*

*"What are you doing?" I asked, my voice still unsteady.*

*"Checking for something that may be choking him," Anatorr replied with a calm that seemed utterly foreign to the rising panic inside of me.*

*When Anatorr was satisfied, he placed his hand behind Lared's neck and tilted the Keeper's chin toward the ceiling. Clamping Lared's nose with the thumb and first finger of one hand, he opened the man's mouth with the other. Then he leaned over and sealing his own mouth over Lared's, began to blow his breath into the motionless body of our friend. He repeated the breathing every few seconds, stopping long enough for the forced air to be expelled, then he began again. After approximately thirty seconds, Lared coughed twice and then lay still. But now he was breathing for himself.*

*I gripped Dadush's arm tightly and whispered, "What is happening?"*

*“Lared miscalculated the dosage,” Dadush replied in an answering whisper, “but Anatorr has saved his life.”*

*“I don’t understand.”*

*“The powder was meant to cause collapse, but Lared took too much and it affected his ability to take air for himself. He will be fine, but you and Anatorr need to get out of here quickly. Pretend you are going for a healer. When you are out of sight, circle back to the serkor and hide in my private rooms. I will join you there when I can. Go, now!”*

*I rushed over to Anatorr and in a voice that could be heard throughout the kafe said, “Let’s go for a healer. The Keeper may be dying.” The shaking in my voice was not a deception. I could hardly stand.*

*“Go!” Dadush ordered. “I will tend to Lared.”*

*Then he looked across the kafe at the three ExComm and said, “You men. Do you know medicine?”*

*Before the surprised policemen could respond, Dadush continued, “Hurry! Help me get him off of the floor.”*

*With that distraction, Anatorr and I hurried from the building. A crowd had gathered outside and we had to push our way through. A familiar takzee was waiting across the street and we ran to it.*

*For the benefit of anyone who might have been listening Anatorr said, “A healer. Help us find one. There is a man dying in there.”*

*“Get in,” the driver said, “I know the place to take you.”*

*As he drove, he gave us instructions: “I will take you to a place of escape. When I stop, you will find a door to an underground tunnel. Get inside quickly and walk in the direction that my takzee will be facing. There will be enough light from the street gratings so that you can see your way. Leave the main trunk at the first side tunnel. When it comes to an end you will be at a ladder. Climb it into the basement of the serkor. Hide in the Keeper’s room until we can come for you.”*

*Eventually, he drove into a narrow alley that was dark because of the high buildings surrounding it. He stopped in the center of the alley where the darkness was like an evening’s gathering dusk. We jumped out and he drove to the end of the alley, turned left and disappeared. Anatorr found the door and forced its rusty hinges open. The smell which crawled out of the tunnel caused me to gag, but I took a deep breath and dropped into the darkness. Anatorr followed and held the trap-door, allowing it to close silently. We were standing in the sewage tunnels of Ingal-Karbe, alone and very much afraid. But for the moment, we were safe.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

“Announce yellow alert, Miss Uhura. Mr. Sulu and secure from warp speed,” Commander Spock ordered.

The navigator adjusted the controls on his board and said, “Our speed is now point nine C, Mr. Spock.”

“All decks answer yellow alert, sir,” Uhura reported.

It was the moment the crew of the *Enterprise* had been waiting for since the long chase to locate the *Isaac Newton* and their missing shipmates had begun weeks before. An audible sigh of relief could be heard throughout the ship. They were on station at the Pleiades Cluster.

Spock turned to Pavel Chekov, who was standing at the science station, and said, “Begin standard sensor sweep, Ensign. When you have finished the standard search, begin a scan to establish the elements of the Richter Scale of Culture for planets Alycone III and Alycone IV. We still do not know our antagonist. If we rush in blindly, we may discover that we are in a great deal of trouble.”

One hour later, the young Russian ensign straightened up from the science scanner, arched his back and rolled his head around, trying to get his stiff muscles to relax.

“Mr. Spock,” he announced, “the preliminary scan is complete. Unless the Vargons have cloaking capabilities, we are the only ship in the immediate area. And, of course, there is also no way to tell if the Romulans are close.”

“I am sure that the Romulans will announce their presence at a time most beneficial to them,” the Vulcan replied. “That is why we will maintain yellow alert until we leave this system.”

Mr. Chekov stepped down into the command area and studied the viewscreen. The main star in the system, Alycone, was still nothing more than a bright glow. He turned to the command station and said, “I am ready to signal Dr. McCoy to correlate the data for the Richter Survey.”

Spock punched a button on the arm of the command chair and said, “Dr. McCoy, to the bridge, please. We are on station.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At just under light speed the stars seemed to drift by like leaves floating on a slow, meandering river. The illusion belied the fact that the *Enterprise* was still traveling through more than 15 million kilometers of space every minute. Historians still elicited startled gasps and cries of disbelief from students when they announced that the first manned spaceship to fly from Terra to its only natural satellite took over three days to travel just 400,000 kilometers.

As the starship coasted toward the worlds circling Alycone, the combined sections of astrophysics and life-sciences worked to establish the Richter norms. The Richter Scale of Culture categorized the sociological developmental levels of, as yet,

unvisited planets. While the findings were used primarily in First Contact studies, they were, by nature, designed to keep such worlds free of outside contamination. Worlds which had a Richter rating of less than F – earth equivalent date, circa 1960 – would be contacted only in the case of extreme emergency. The system was also intended to assist a commander’s decision making process when an emergency arose and when General Order One, the Prime Directive, was not in jeopardy.

Alycone IV was judged at Richter F, barely. Long-range scanners detected an extraordinary amount of pollution in the atmosphere, mainly from the burning of fossilized fuels. As strange as it seemed for a world that far advanced, Chekov and McCoy could locate no signs of atomic power. Alycone III was another story. It was in every sense a J world, very much on a par with Terra, Vulcan, or Alpha Centauri B. The military factors which almost convinced Chekov and McCoy to give the world a K, placed it in a category of extreme danger to the *Enterprise* and its crew.

“It is difficult to tell without using more active sensors which could give away our presence, but it appears that the single space station in orbit around Alycone III is the location of their entire space fleet,” Ensign Chekov reported.

“That will make our approach to the planet extremely dangerous. It will be like trying to beard the lion in his den,” Lieutenant Sulu said.

“It could also make our task easier,” Chekov said.

“That’s right, Pavel,” McCoy put in. “They have placed all their eggs in one basket.”

“Indeed,” Spock commented. “If we are forced to fight, and judging from what little we know about the Vargons, and they seem to be instinctively belligerent, if we can disable that space station, we may eliminate their ability to respond.”

“Isn’t that what I just said?” McCoy asked.

“I suppose, in your own quaint way,” Spock replied.

“Well, then let’s go crack some eggs,” McCoy declared. “Jim is waiting.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The sub-commander tensed to attention as Commander Koba and the Centurion stepped onto the bridge of the *Black Inferno*. Before the lift doors could completely close, the sub-commander reported, “We are at battle readiness. Scanners indicate that the *Enterprise* has decreased speed again.”

Koba balled his right hand into a fist and crashed it satisfyingly into the palm of his left. “Then we have him! Signal all weapons crews to stand at ready!”

“Do they show any damage which has caused them to reduce speed?” the Centurion asked.

“He advises caution by that statement,” Koba thought, “and I see the wisdom of his approach.”

Koba spun to the sensor officer and barked, “Answer the Centurion. Or I will get someone at your post who can!”

“Commander,” the man stammered, “there are no signs of damage. Readings from his warp engines are at near normal levels. Just as we were unable to determine

a reason for his decrease from Warp 11 to Warp 8, so we can find no technical explanation for his drop out of light-speed.”

“Perhaps he has reached his destination,” the Centurion mused.

“Tactical, put the system ahead on the viewer. Indicate relative positions with our ship at the center of the screen,” Koba ordered.

When the desired patterns emerged on the viewscreen, the tactical officer said, “Commander, we have a map of the star system ahead. We know that it has eight planets in orbit. Our records show nothing else.”

“*Enterprise* is looking for something, Centurion,” Koba said.

“The most obvious thing would be the presence of the ship that kidnaped Kirk,” the Centurion replied.

“Agreed,” Koba said. “Helm, as soon as he changes course, adjust our plot for an interception. Secure from chase speed as soon as we are within 500,000 kilometers. Maintain cloak.”

“As you command,” the helmsman said, snapping back a crisp reply.

“Do you agree with me, Centurion, that as soon as *Enterprise* has located her Captain, we should make our attack?” Koba asked.

“The joy of their reunion will no doubt lessen their vigilance,” the Centurion observed. “It appears to be a good plan. Just do not underestimate Kirk, or his crew. Too many others have done that and their wives were draped in mourning clothes.”

“I will see to it that fate does befall the *Black Inferno*, Centurion. I want to present Kirk’s head to our Praetor.”

“And what will you do with the rest of his body, Koba?”

“Perhaps those widows would enjoy receiving certain pieces of Starfleet’s once-greatest warrior.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The proklinat had deadened his nerves just enough so that James T. Kirk was startled by the first contact with the ak-borok’s force field, but he was not hurt. At least not by the first contact. His automatic response was to move away from the field and he fell forward into it again. The field’s strength increased each time it was touched by its victim and even proklinat could not mask the second jolt. Fighting his tortured nerves, Kirk slowly leaned away, holding his position once the contact was broken.

For the next 24 hours he did not move. Every muscle in his body screamed out for movement, for relief from their rigidity, but Kirk’s brain, tired and depleted as he was, held his body away from the ak-borok. Jim knew that the pain of a third shock might be too much to withstand, and he had to hold on.

The door to his detention cell opened and Moss-Kuib walked in, trailing two executioners behind him. The Organ walked to the front of the ak-borok and studied the display panel above Kirk’s head.

“You are impressive, Earth Man. Touching the field only twice must have required tremendous control.” Motioning to the executioners, he continued, “Release

him. I have only one more torture for him to experience before I take him to the Sovereign tomorrow morning.”

The force field sparked off and James Kirk held his position. When he stepped down from the pad, he stumbled, but did not fall. He did not stretch his muscles. His face was empty.

Curious at Kirk’s response, Moss-Kuib stepped closer. It was the second time he had underestimated his captive. Jim Kirk’s muscles did not respond instantly to his brain’s direction, and so the blow he aimed for the center of Moss-Kuib’s face glanced off the bony brow ridge. The Organ was so stunned by the attack that he gave Kirk the chance for a second blow. Before the executioners could move in, the Captain recovered enough of his coordination to feel Moss-Kuib’s face beneath his fist. The Organ screamed in pain and staggered backwards. Kirk hurled himself at his tormentor, the force of his body knocking both him and Moss-Kuib to the floor.

Kirk landed on top and reached for the Vargon’s throat. He started to strangle his captor when one of the executioners drove his foot into the middle of Kirk’s back. As he straightened in response to that blow, the second attendant swung a powerful kick to the side of Kirk’s head. James Kirk rolled to the floor unconscious. The Vargons had won again.

\* \* \* \* \*

When he regained consciousness, James Kirk was lying on a bed in a room he had never seen. His back and head ached from where the executioners had struck him, but as always, there was no lasting tissue damage. When he tried to set up,

waves of nausea swept over him and he collapsed back into the bed. As his ragged breathing slowed, he tried again, and this time succeeded in pushing himself up. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat there, trying to let the rest of his body catch up with his racing heart.

A glass of clear liquid was on a small table at the side of the bed. Kirk picked it up and waved it under his nose. Frowning, he raised the glass to his lips and took a tentative drink. Water! He turned the glass up and savored the moment as the cool liquid streamed down his throat. He paused for a second and then finished the water. At that moment, Moss-Kuib entered the room, followed by Myahkee and two executioners. Kirk placed the empty glass on the table and held his hands up in a mock gesture of surrender.

“Are those two your personal pets, Moss-Kuib?” Kirk taunted.

“Myahkee will stay with you for one cycle. Then I will take you to the Sovereign. You will find her methods very different from what you have experienced so far. You may even find it pleasurable.”

Before Kirk could respond, Moss-Kuib spun and walked out of the room, the two executioners trailing behind in his wake.

As the door slid closed, leaving Kirk and Myahkee alone, the Captain stood to his feet.

“Why don’t you fight him?” Kirk asked.

“And end up like you?” Myahkee replied. “You have seen what they can do with the Chamber. You have experienced the skill of the healers. They can repair your

body until at last your brain shuts down in self-defense. The insanity is worse than anything else. They have ways to make you remember what you used to be. No, James Kirk, I will fight Moss-Kuib in my own way.”

“Thank you,” Kirk whispered.

“For what?”

“For using my name. It has been my only hold on sanity more times than I care to think. But won’t he punish you for using it?”

“For the next cycle, six of your hours, Moss-Kuib will be occupied with preparations for journeying to the surface. He will not know anything we say, or anything we do.”

“Surely he has recording equipment all over this ship. Everything I have seen about him says that he maintains order by terror. The threat of discovery is a most effective weapon.”

“This is my room. There are no such devices here. It is his one concession to me. That and my bracelet of flowers.”

“But you are obviously his, his,” Kirk hesitated, he did not know what to say.

“On Resenka the word is tuki, or the full word, prostituka.”

“I am sorry, Myahkee. I did not mean to offend.”

“You do not offend me, James. The arrangement keeps me alive, and from here I can sometimes help,” she paused and then continued, “help others.”

The signal was clear, but it took Captain Kirk a long moment to understand. The Vargons had almost won. Almost.

“Help others,” Kirk said as the realization dawned on him, “you mean like Obolen?”

Myahkee had been standing several meters away from the bed as the two had been conversing, but at Kirk’s last statement, she ran to the bed and grasped Jim’s hands.

“You know Obolen?” she said, her joy barely contained. “Is he well? And what of my Uncle Gernet?”

“Gernet has been captured by the ExComm. We were betrayed by Mitork. When I left Resenka, Obolen was attempting to mount a rescue. I left him some devices which might help and he was enlisting the aid of a friend named Maff.”

Myahkee was obviously delighted with the news that Obolen was well and that he had mounted a rescue. She had learned months ago of Mitork’s treachery, but was unable to communicate that message to Resenka. She did not know Maff, but she had heard nothing negative about him.

“As Moss-Kuib’s personal plaything, I am able to hear many things that no one else on the *Repelator*, not even Aireb, ever hears. Sometimes I can get word back to the Others, but it is always at great personal risk. If I am discovered, I do not think that even my special ‘talents’ would save me.”

“Myahkee you must have great strength. How can you continue to allow Moss-Kuib to treat you like this?”

Myahkee stood and paced the room. She stopped back in front of Captain Kirk and said, “Obolen told me that my mother once gave herself to two ExComm officers to

save her lover's life. I learned since I have been here that she gave herself to three of them for two days so that Obolen would not be killed. He has never learned of her sacrifice. If she could do that for two men, can I do less for a world?"

"Myahkee, Obolen knows that Elena saved his life. Mitork confessed."

And then James Kirk was silent. He had missed the earlier clue when Myahkee said, "My uncle, Gernet." The Vargon executioners had taken more out of Kirk than he had realized. Now she had talked about her mother and his subconscious had put the name of Elena with the story of Obolen's release.

"Your mother was Elena," he said in amazement. "You are the child she mentioned in her diary. You are the daughter of Elena and Obolen."

"My father must certainly trust you, James, if he allowed you to read Mother's diary. That privilege was granted only to a handful of people."

"He asked me to use a device on my shuttlecraft to record the diary and store it for safety. If someone from my ship, the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, my First Officer, Mr. Spock, or my Chief Medical Officer, Leonard McCoy, find the *Newton*, they will be able to use my personal code and access Elena's diary."

Without warning, Myahkee quickly closed the distance between herself and Captain Kirk and kissed him. James received the kiss hungrily, and then he drew back.

"Does your resistance apply even to me?" Myahkee asked, her disappointment obvious.

“Believe me, Myahkee, resisting you is not my first wish, but I will not take you like this.”

“You are not taking me, James. I am giving myself to you.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Several hours later, James Kirk awoke and looked at the woman laying beside of him. Myahkee had been watching the Captain sleep. As he stirred, Myahkee rolled over and retrieved the bracelet she had removed from her wrist when Kirk had picked her up and gently laid her in the bed.

“What are those flowers?” Kirk asked.

“Smell them. Let the blossoms touch your face. Breathe their fragrance deeply,” Myahkee said, and put the blooms under his nose.

When he inhaled the fragrance, a blank, distant look crossed Jim’s eyes. Myahkee quickly got out of bed and walked around to the Captain’s side. She tore one of the flowers from the bracelet in such a way that its absence would not be noticed. Then she pushed the pedals between Kirk’s lips and into his mouth where they immediately began to dissolve.

“You read the diary, James,” she said, but if Kirk heard her, he made no reply, no response. “They are pahodja, the flowers Reetaricka told my mother could erase your memory. I use them to keep Moss-Kuib off-balance. Someday I may use them on myself. They must touch the olfactory organs or be consumed to be effective. The first time you smelled them you did not touch them, but they still clouded your mind. I do not know what lasting effect they will have on you. You are different from either the

Vargons or the Resenka. But I cannot risk being exposed. I can still help my people.

And when they get you to the Sovereign, they will rip every secret from your mind. I am sorry, James. There was no other way.”

*Dadush came into the room, his body showing the weight of his years and the anxiety of the day's unexpected events. He unbuttoned his heavy coat and hung it on a rack just inside the door. He unwound the gray neck-scarf, draped it over a hook, and hung his hat on top of the scarf. With a sigh, he pushed his feet to carry him into the back room where Anatorr and I were waiting. He closed the door that separated his private quarters from the room where he received guests and slumped onto a hard, wooden chair.*

*"Lared will survive," he said, answering our unspoken question. Then he continued, "The three ExComm were very upset when you did not return to the kafe, particularly the young one you identified as being from Zenyuk. I have seen many angry men, I have been in anger's grip myself, but this was an fury driven almost by insanity. Whatever it is you two have done, he carries a powerful hatred against you."*

*"It is not us, Dadush," I said. "It is me."*

*And I quickly told him the story of my arrest and interrogation, of the way Genrikh's eyes clawed over my naked body, of my taunts and of Zalygin's warning.*

*Dadush shook his head sadly and began to weep.*

*"Child," he began, "we must get you to safety."*

*Before another word could be spoken, the door exploded inward, kicked from its hinges by the heavy booted foot of an ExComm special guard. He stood just outside*

*the door, his arm hanging easily at his side, a projectile-weapon gripped securely in his fist. Three other special guards ran quickly into the room, their weapons drawn and leveled at us.*

*“What is the meaning of this?” Dadush roared, no longer looking or sounding like an old man.*

*The guard closest to him involuntarily took a step backwards. The Bolskars may have turned many from The Words and from the serkor, but there was enough respect for an aged Keeper in that one guard to cause him to hesitate. The man who walked through the door, however, showed no respect for anything sacred or holy. Genrikh strode through the shattered door, marched straight up to Dadush and struck the old man across the cheek with the barrel of his weapon. How he remained standing, I do not know, but Dadush somehow held on.*

*Genrikh walked towards me, but Dadush grabbed his arm and stopped him. Dadush forced the ExComm inquisitor to face him and then said, “Elena tells me you are a beater of women. Now you violate a serkor and strike a Keeper. You bring shame to Resenka. You bring shame to your uniform. You bring shame to yourself.”*

*Dadush’s words were too much. Genrikh struck him again, and this time Dadush slumped to the floor, bleeding from a second jagged wound.*

*Genrikh spun and stormed back to the open door. He turned to the three officers and said, “Bring those two. Kill the old man.”*

*I remember next only that I screamed, "NO!" and sprang towards Genrikh at the same time Anatorr moved towards the ExComm. The officer standing closest to me must have struck me from behind, because when I came to, I was lying on a dirty cot in a basement room. Anatorr was sitting in a chair beside of me, his face swollen and bruised, his hands tied securely behind his back, his legs and chest lashed to the chair.*

*I tried to move but pain and nausea seized me and I fell back down. I looked at Anatorr and asked, "Dadush?"*

*Anatorr said nothing, but sadly shook his head. When he spoke, it was with difficulty, his lips were split and swollen, "ExComm follow orders, Princess."*

*I had no chance to grieve because the door to our cell opened and Zalygin entered, followed by Genrikh. I could tell from the expression on Genrikh's face that his superior had taken some of the harsh pride out of him. Zalygin must surely object to the murder of a Keeper, I thought.*

*Without preamble, Zalygin said, "Elena, you have been arrested and charged with participation in the cause of the Others. You will be tried and then sentenced. Anatorr, you are similarly charged. You will suffer a similar fate."*

*As he turned to leave, I struggled to my feet and rushed toward him. Genrikh anticipated my movement and struck me hard on the side of my face and I fell headlong onto the floor. I pushed myself to my hands and knees and spat out blood. My head seemed to be exploding with pain, but I forced myself to speak.*

*“Zalygin, I gave you more credit, but you are as dim-witted as your trained assassin.”*

*Zalygin turned back to look at me, his face white with rage.*

*Before I could be silenced, I went on, “With genuine ExComm incompetence, either yours or Genrikh’s, you have misread what you have seen. Yes, I am with the Others. I have been with the Others for almost five years. But this man,” I paused and shook my head towards Anatorr, “this man is only someone who has paid my bills and bought me pretty presents for almost two years. In return for his generosity, I have been forced to submit to his inept advances. If it were not for his money, I would never have looked twice at him.”*

*The room was strangely silent and I began again, “The Others? That laughable old fool? He has trouble delivering in bed with a willing subject, let alone deliver even the most simple information for the Others. At the first sign of trouble one like him would betray us all!”*

*Anatorr’s face was a mixture of pain, betrayal and disbelief. “Princess,” he began.*

*“Shut up,” I hissed, “I never wish to hear you call me that again!”*

*I forced myself to my feet, walked to Anatorr and slapped him across the face as hard as I could. I reached into his shirt pocket and took out a clean cloth and wiped the blood from my mouth.*

*I turned back to the stunned officers and purred, "Take me out of here to a real bed. Show me what real men are like. I will give you pleasure such as you will never forget."*

*Before anyone could answer, I threw the cloth at Anatorr and twisted around to leave the room. His eyes were focused on the floor and I did not think he saw me fighting back tears.*

*Genrikh followed me quickly. As Zalygin closed the door I heard Anatorr whisper, "Princess, I love you. I will always love you. There will never be a day when I will not love you. With my last breath I will speak your name."*

*I never saw my beloved again.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Myahkee starred at the silent, unmoving body of James T. Kirk. She watched him for a long time. Finally she walked to the comm-panel and entered her private code to signal Organ Moss-Kuib. When his voice rumbled over the speaker she said, "Excellency, the Earth Man, does not move. He barely breathes. I do not know what is wrong. He may be dying."

A Vargon curse roared from the bridge of the *Repelator*. Then Moss-Kuib said, "Signal the healers. Tell them if he dies, I will take them before the Sovereign."

Myahkee broke the connection and did as she had been ordered. Then she walked from her private room and into the Organ's reception room and huddled in a dark corner where she could not be seen. Part of her private war against her captors had always been to cause them as much discomfort as she could by the way she moved in their presence. It appeared artless to anyone who did not know, but the seductive movements were deliberate. She knew that it caused great discomfort to Aireb, the healers, the executioners, anyone who saw her. They would not risk the wrath of Organ Moss-Kuib by so much as looking directly at her, but she knew that they looked. She knew of their secret desires, one executioner had made the mistake of admitting it to Moss-Kuib and had been instantly vaporized for his honesty.

But today was different. James Kirk was different. She had almost considered openly assisting him, trying to help him escape. Then she had allowed her mind to clear and she knew that two of them alone against Moss-Kuib would be fatal to them

both. In the end she had chosen the pahodja, knowing that it would spare the Earth Man his final agony.

\* \* \* \* \*

First Officer Spock ordered the *Enterprise* to full stop at the extreme edge of the solar system known as Alycone. Sensor scans continued to reveal the presence of no vessel in the immediate area but their own. Ahead of them were two inhabited worlds and on one of them would be their captain and their shipmates. Logic dictated that Alycone III, the most advanced world, would be the place to begin their search. Alycone IV was too technologically backward to have sent a vessel into planetary orbit, let alone into deep space.

As the science team completed their analysis of sensor sweeps, they discovered the presence of an enormous deep space vessel, one larger even than the *Enterprise*. It was docked at the orbiting space station. Another craft, smaller than the first, but larger than a Federation shuttlecraft was also docked at the station. There were six other, smaller craft, which appeared to be transport vessels. As they made their observations, one of the smallest ships detached itself, dropped into planetary orbit on its own and then descended into the atmosphere where it evidently made a soft landing on the planet's surface.

Spock had brought his ship into the system on an approach vector which, although it did not tax Lieutenant Sulu's skills as a navigator to their fullest limit, did pose an interesting problem. The trick was to be able to gather sensor data and yet

keep the system's sun between themselves and any scanners which might be searching outward from Alycone III. Sulu had been successful in avoiding detection, but at the price of unrevealed data. There was simply no other way.

The Vulcan waited until the normal shift rotation brought the senior bridge crew back on duty. When they were all at their stations, he signaled Dr. McCoy to join them. When the Doctor emerged from the turbolift, Spock recounted the data with which they were all as familiar as he. Satisfied that everyone understood the basics of their position, he asked, "Questions, anyone?"

He knew this team and knew that there would be none. He knew that Jim would have posed the question, out of politeness, the Captain would have said. While it was an emotional response to which no Vulcan would have admitted, Spock knew that humans appreciated the gesture.

He looked at each member of the bridge crew: Uhura at communications, Scotty at engineering, Sulu at the helm, Chekov at the science station, and Leonard McCoy at his customary place beside the captain's chair. The *Enterprise* was primarily a craft dedicated to exploration. Exploring uncharted worlds and making contacts with formerly undiscovered civilizations was part of their charter. But the *Enterprise* was also a fighting ship in the tradition of earth's finest vessels and crews. If these people were forced to fight to retrieve their shipmates, there was no one better equipped in Starfleet. Now the senior bridge crew were all looking at Spock. With Jim gone, he was their commander. They were waiting for his orders.

“I have asked Mr. DeSalle and Mr. Farrell to station themselves in auxiliary control. Mr. Singh is in engineering. They said they preferred these duty stations to retiring to their quarters if we were going to, I believe Mr. DeSalle’s precise locution was, ‘Kick some butt, and take some names.’ A curious expression.”

“Aye,” Scotty said, “but one that matches my own feelings about the next few hours.”

“Indeed, Mr. Scott,” Spock went on. “But there is another expression which is also popular among humans: ‘Actions speak louder than words.’ The time for action is upon us.”

“It’s about time, too. These Vargons need to learn who they’re dealing with,” Dr McCoy said, his tone of voice decidedly not that of a dedicated healer.

“As you say, Doctor,” Spock replied. “Mr. Scott, have engineering ready to deliver warp speed on my command. Mr. Chekov, you have the transporter patterns of our Captain and his team programmed into the scanners. As soon as you locate them, lock onto them and beam them out. Doctor, be prepared to receive casualties. Miss Uhura, if the Romulans decloak in our vicinity, go immediately to red alert. If that is our status when they are discovered, make a ship-wide announcement immediately.”

“I’ll sing out at once, Mr. Spock,” Uhura said.

“A simple spoken word will be sufficient, Lieutenant.” Uhura smiled and Spock went on, “Very well. Mr. Sulu, raise us above the galactic plane. If they are scanning the system, let them know they have visitors.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Two healers had already died. Organ Moss-Kuib had strangled his first victim. The healer was too well trained to obedience to even resist, although he had been holding a medical force-probe at the time of his death. Moss-Kuib had focused a narrow beam disruptor on the stomach of the second one and watched with satisfaction as the beam spread outward, consuming the healer, one tiny piece at a time.

The Earth Man lived, but he had slipped deeper into the pahodja-induced coma. The Vargon medical scanners detected the presence of a substance they had never before observed in their studies of James Kirk. But the healer who had made the discovery was the healer whose crumpled body lay at Moss-Kuib's feet, his findings forever sealed in his dead brain. Myahkee and her secret were safe.

Before he, too, had perished, the second healer had foolishly admitted that the Earth Man was dying, and nothing in Vargon science could prevent it. He estimated four cycles, twenty-four hours.

Before Moss-Kuib could dispatch any more of his medical staff to meet the Spirit of the Great Pateetsa, Security Chief Aireb signaled from the bridge.

"Organ, an alien ship had just appeared on our early warning scanners. The propulsion signatures are similar to the Earth Man's small vessel. It may be from their Federation."

"Correlate all information and have it on the main screen when I reach the bridge, Aireb. Signal all sections to battle alert. Prepare to release docking clamps. The Sovereign may yet see an Earth Man die."

In Moss-Kuib's quarters, Myahkee listened to the exchange. Almost without thinking, she made her decision. She quickly selected a dark, non-descript garment from the Organ's apparel closet and slipped it on, the first clothing she had worn since her capture by the Vargons almost a decade before. Early in her enslavement, she had attempted to cover herself, but decided that the beatings and the sessions inside the Chamber were not worth the benefits of modesty.

Not all of the Vargons onboard the Repelator were as tall as Moss-Kuib, but her height was definitely less than any crewman she had seen. She selected a pair of boots, but found she could not walk in them because they were so large. She filled the cavernous boots with cloth from the bed and tried again. The effect raised her height several centimeters. It was not much, but it would have to do.

Myahkee glanced into a mirror and knew that her disguise would not stand close inspection. She twisted her hair into a knot and secured it under a scarf. She added a hood to further disguise her face.

Myahkee stopped by the bedroom door and entered a security code Moss-Kuib thought was known only to himself. A hidden panel slid open, revealing a small weapons cache. She selected the only hand weapon she had ever seen discharged, the only one she was certain of being able to fire, and slipped it into the folds of her garment. Satisfied that she had done all she could, she closed the panel, left the bedroom and slipped into the corridor, pausing only to make a few changes in the decor of the rooms. There would be two guards at the entrance to this private section, but she was counting on the element of surprise to overcome them and make her escape.

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Enterprise* deliberately moved into possible sensor tracking range of the Vargons. As she did so, the planet Alycone III, Vargon, was on the opposite side of the system's star from the Federation starship. Alycone IV, Resenka, was in a roughly similar orbit farther out. Lieutenant Sulu brought the ship in at Warp 2 and dropped to sublight five million kilometers out from Vargon.

"Hold position here," Spock ordered.

"Thrusters at station keeping," Sulu responded.

Ensign Chekov straightened up from the science station and turned excitedly towards the command chair.

"Mr. Spock, sensor readings detect one human life-sign on board the largest wessel! It must be the *Repelator* that Kepten Kirk signaled us about."

"Can you isolate the signal?" McCoy asked. "Is it Jim or Shelton? And what about Berek and K'Yle? Their signatures should stand out, too."

"In addition to hundreds of life-signs which I am assuming to be Wargons, there is one other different signature. It is neither an Antosian or a Delcaltor," Chekov answered. He leaned back into the viewer and adjusted his instrumentation. When he spoke again he said, "All I can say for certain, Doctor McCoy, is that there is a human on board that ship. But only one."

McCoy turned to face the Vulcan.

"You are in command, Mr. Spock. We stand ready for your orders."

“Thank you, Doctor,” the Vulcan replied. Both his voice and that of the doctor’s was devoid of any of their usual word play. Anyone who knew the two of them and had just stepped onto the bridge, would instantly have been put on guard by their exchange. When Spock and McCoy weren’t jabbing at each other or fencing with words, the situation was serious indeed.

“Take us in, Mr. Sulu. Warp One. Mr. Chekov, I want to know who their hostage is. Lieutenant Uhura, signal Farrell in Auxiliary Control. Tell him to begin a sensor sweep of the area ahead of us. I want his information to be separate from that which Mr. Chekov has gathered.”

“Shall I raise shields?” Sulu asked.

“At once, Lieutenant. And signal red alert.”

As the red alert indicators flashed on, Spock toggled the intraship button on the arm of the command chair.

“All hands, this is Commander Spock. We are approaching a Vargon warship. All weapons crews to your posts. All weapons systems to battle readiness. Spock out.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Inside the cloaked Romulan ship, the change in attitude of the *Enterprise* did not go unnoticed. Commander Koba had not left the bridge in hours, a fact which almost every member of the crew within sight of the Commander personally felt. Koba understood the reasons for their stealth approach, but that did not mean he liked it. After one particularly blistering reprimand of the helmsman for a minor deviation of

orders, the Centurion said that he was hungry and asked if the Commander would join him.

Koba took a deep breath, understanding the Centurion's deeper meaning and said, "No, Centurion. But I give you leave. Just don't be too far away."

As the Centurion turned to leave, the sensor operator spoke rapidly.

"Commander, the *Enterprise* has dropped out of space warp within the last few moments. Now all weapons show ready and their shields are at maximum intensity. They appear to be on course for the third planet in the system ahead."

"Match their course and speed, helm," Koba ordered. "We may soon see action!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Myahkee opened the door to Moss-Kuib's quarters and as the first guard turned, she activated her energy weapon. The only sound was a sharp crack of energy and the guard was gone. The second guard pulled his own weapon, but the shock of someone exiting the Organ's private domain without announcement or warning, slowed his reaction for one fatal second. It was enough. Myahkee aimed and dispassionately pulled the trigger.

On the bridge of the *Repelator* a security officer looked up from his board and said, "Chief Aireb, there have been two weapons discharges on level three, close to the Organ's private sector."

Moss-Kuib looked at Security Chief Aireb and snapped, "Where is the Earth Man?"

Aireb signaled the med-bay and the healer on duty verified that the Earth Man was still under restraint, his condition continuing its gradual decline.

"I will personally check on the situation," Aireb said and as soon as Moss-Kuib nodded permission, the Security Chief signaled for a turbolift. Once inside, he ordered the car to take him to the position of the reported weapons firing. He stepped out on level three, his weapon drawn and ready. No one was in sight and the air was filled with the odor of vaporized flesh.

Aireb touched the comm-panel and when he received no reply, activated a security override channel and stepped into the corridor. The procedure was repeated at the door to Moss-Kuib's quarters. Again there was no answering signal, but this time, Aireb did not have the necessary code overrides to get inside. Not even the Security Chief was permitted that information. Only two people knew those codes. One was on the bridge and the other, Myahkee, did not answer. Aireb advised Moss-Kuib of the situation and the Organ opened the door by remote activation. Aireb stepped inside, completely unnerved by what he saw. The shrine to the Sovereign had been toppled. The replica command chair had been slashed with a sharp implement. In the private section, the damage was even worse. Nearly every piece of furniture had been damaged in some way. Clothes had been thrown onto the floor. It looked like the work of an insane person. And worst of all, Myahkee was nowhere to be found. As quickly

as he could, Aireb reported his findings. Moss-Kuib's only reply was, "Find her Aireb. And find out who did this."

*The day Anatorr died, I knew it before Obolen came to my flat and told me.*

*When Zalygin and Genrikh finished with me, they simply let me go. I thanked the Holy Ones that I was free, but there was no way to account for my good fortune. They had a confessed rebel in their grasp and many people have disappeared with far less provocation.*

*After my performance, Genrikh had sent word to the holding cell and Anatorr was released. At the end, he had gone on a mission with the Others and was captured. They took him into the forest and executed him with a single bullet to the back of the head.*

*When Obolen came with the terrible news, I said nothing, I could not speak. I looked at Obolen with disbelief, but the expression in his eyes told me he had spoken the truth, and confirmed what I had felt deep inside my heart.*

*I left Obolen standing where he was and walked into my sleeping-room. I stood looking out the weather-glass, the same one through which I had once watched Anatorr pick blossoms for me. I unconsciously reached down and lifted the chasha-vaza which he had often filled with Jassica. I rolled it between my hands and ran my finger across the rim. As I reached over to place it back on the shelf, it slipped from my hands and broke into a hundred pieces. I dropped to my knees, heedless of the shards of glass,*

*and covered my face in my hands. When I looked up again, Adzeva was disappearing behind the horizon. Obolen was sitting on the edge of my bed, silently watching me.*

*I rushed to him and began to cry again.*

*“Elena,” Obolen said as gently as I had ever heard him speak, “this slip of paper was found in his pocket. I knew you would want it.”*

*The paper was dirty, stained with the perspiration of Anatorr’s hands, and creased almost to the point of tearing where he had opened the paper and refolded it time and time again.*

*One word at the top, larger than the rest was evidently the title for the page. There were three paragraphs. Over the next months I read it so often that I committed it to memory and could recall it without prompting, but until the ExComm tore it to pieces, I read it and held it as my last link to Anatorr.*

*And now I will add it to my diary.*

\* \* \* \* \*

### REMEMBER

*I remember her tears that night in the cell in Ingal-Karbe. I am sure she thought I did not see, but they were a signal to me that her words were lies. She did what she did to protect and save me. Love like ours could never have been a lie.*

*I remember the smell of her skin, the taste of her lips, the color of her eyes. I remember how it felt to hold her small hand in mine, how she*

*felt when I clutched her close in my arms. I remember the sound of her laughter. I remember the way she wrinkled her brow, pouted out her lips and snapped off her words when I teased her. I remember her cries of pleasure when we made love. But the pain of separation keeps me from putting all of those pieces together and forming one complete picture of her in my mind.*

*Oh, Elena, I love you so much. I could happily watch the tormentors tear my heart from my body if I could see you just one more time.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*I folded the paper and turned to Obolen.*

*“Did he say anything?”*

*Obolen nodded.*

*“I overheard the ExComm bragging about the execution to one of his friends.*

*Anatorr said one word, only one. He called your name.”*

*At times like this, when my memory accuses me, I wish I could reach the pahodja which grows just outside the window of my cell, just out of reach. I do not know if the ExComm planted it there as a torment. I do not even know if they are aware of what it is and what it can do. I am not even certain that the stories are true, but if I could reach it, and try it, I would.*

*It was one of the stories I heard from old Reetaricka. The deeply lined, weathered skin on her face seemed to grow dark when she talked about the pahodja plant. "If remembering ever becomes too heavy and you think you might be crushed by the memories, make a beverage from its leaves and drink it. The drought will erase the memories and give you peace."*

*Most people only laughed at the stories Reetaricka told. They called her a crazy old woman. I was only a school girl, but I believed her. Those old eyes, which had seen so much, seemed to open up to me. I really believe I could see some of the things she had seen. With the innocent wonder only a child can express, I asked, "Reetaricka, how will you know when it is time to drink pahodja?"*

*With great effort, she stood up and slowly, very slowly, crossed the room and sat beside me. She held my face in her hard, calloused hands and said, "You will know, child. More than anyone I have ever met in the 87 years I have watched Adzeva rise and set, you will know. But your memories will be so strong, that I doubt even the pahodja will ease the pain that they bring you. The joy that you recall will release your spirit. The remembered sorrow will crush your heart. The men who finally come to make you their victim, will not allow you to forget."*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

James Kirk had not been able to give her the exact location of where he had left Obolen, but his recollections had been enough that Myahkee thought she knew where her father might have gone. And she was determined to find him and to help him rescue Gernet. Keeping to service crawl ways and emergency passages, she managed to keep out of sight. Finally she reached the hanger bay where the *Isaac Newton* had once been towed in under tractor beam. Today the bay contained only two personal descent vehicles. Because the *Repelator* was secured to the Battle Dock, no guards were posted.

Myahkee waited in a crawl way until she was certain that the corridor below her was empty. Then she removed the access panel and dropped noiselessly to the floor below. No security access was needed to enter the bay and the door slid open as she approached. She quickly crossed the cavernous compartment and entered one of the descent vehicles. The ship had no armaments, no defensive screens beyond basic navigational shields necessary to avoid meteorite collision and to protect the vehicle during planetary reentry. No one was in the shuttle bay and no security locks were in operation. As she accessed the panel which released the door to the vehicle, it slid open at her touch and she stepped inside, closing the hatch behind her.

“The Holy Ones are with me today,” she thought as she dropped into the pilot’s seat and began a pre-flight check. During long hours alone in Moss-Kuib’s quarters she

had received permission from the Organ to access the computer's records and had learned how to activate most of the devices onboard, including the descent shuttles. Now she would test her theoretical knowledge under actual flight conditions.

"As a youngling back on Resenka, I never even drove a jalop," she said to herself. "And in a few minutes, I am going to pilot a space vehicle across several million kaalobars. I hope Mother would have approved."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Mr. Spock, this is Lieutenant Farrell. I have an interesting reading from the secondary scans you ordered me to make. Make ready to receive it."

"I am ready, Lieutenant. Direct your findings to the science console."

Spock turned to Pavel Chekov.

"Analysis, Mr. Chekov."

The Russian peered intently into the viewer, the features of his face were obscured by the blue glow reflecting from the device. Finally, he stood and turned to the center seat.

"Sir, it is the *Isaac Newton*, and in a most unusual elliptical orbit around Alycone IV. The ship appears to be abandoned. Power levels are at barely minimum levels."

"No life signs onboard, Pavel?" McCoy asked.

"No, Doctor. The shuttlecraft is empty," Chekov answered the doctor and then turned to Mr. Spock and said, "I have fixed its position in our computers. We can lock a transporter beam onto it when we get within range and pull it into the shuttlecraft hanger."

“Noted, Ensign,” Spock said. “Coordinate with Mr. Farrell and search both planets if you can.”

“Grasping at straws, Spock?” McCoy asked.

“The Captain would do the same, Doctor.”

“I know, Spock. I know.”

Sulu got everyone’s immediate attention when he said, “My panel indicates that big ship is moving.”

From the engineering console, Scotty agreed, “They are definitely powering up, Mr. Spock. It looks like the haggis is in the fire for sure.”

“Go to red alert. Mr. Sulu, take us in, but keep your maneuvering options open. We still do not have the slightest clue about their weapons capabilities, although logic dictates that we assume they are formidable.”

\* \* \* \* \*

When Organ Moss-Kuib was informed that the approaching star vessel had powered on all weapons systems and raised defensive screens, he had ordered that the undocking procedure begin immediately. Under normal conditions, it would have taken several minutes to clear all moorings and secure all access ways to the Battle Dock. But this was combat conditions and the *Repelator’s* central computer went to maximum override. As soon as all entryways into the ship were secured, the *Repelator* simply dropped away. Air escaped from several docking ports on the Battle Dock before emergency seals inside the space station were activated. Fortunately, no station

personnel had been working inside those access corridors or they would have been sucked into the vacuum of space.

For Organ Moss-Kuib, even under ordinary circumstances, the lives of the station's maintenance personnel would have been of little consequence. As it was, his vessel was coming under attack from an alien of unknown capabilities. He was confident that his ship was superior, but he was taking no chances delaying his approach to a battle position. And Myahkee was still missing, her fate, still unknown.

At the precise moment that the *Repelator* severed umbilical connections with the Battle Dock, Myahkee opened the hanger bay door by remote control from inside her descent vehicle. She had managed to depressurize the bay to thirty percent of normal when the giant vessel dropped away from its berth. She quickly activated lifting thrusters and when the small ship was floating in the hanger bay, she blew the outer doors open and dropped into space along with the debris that was whisked out in the resulting vacuum.

The maneuver was immediately detected on Security Chief Aireb's situation board.

"Organ Moss-Kuib," he shouted, "the hanger bay doors have opened. I suspect a computer malfunction."

"Close them, idiot. I'll access the logs and see who was responsible later. Let's get underway."

Before the helmsman could respond, Aireb spoke again.

"Excellency, an orbital descent vehicle was sucked out of the bay."

He paused and studied the readings.

“Sensors show there is someone on board that ship. The readings indicate it is...” Aireb paused, unable to make his voice identify the ship’s pilot.

Moss-Kuib heard the silence and stepped over to his security chief. He studied the readings and then walked back to the command center and dropped heavily into his chair. All around the bridge, crewmen willed their bodies to dissolve into thin air or sweep underneath a console. They knew of the search for Myahkee.

The Organ barked at the communications officer to hail the escaping vessel. Seconds later an image appeared on the *Repelator’s* forward screen.

“Myahkee,” Moss-Kuib said, his voice barely a whisper. Then with more strength he added, “Why?”

“James Kirk reminded me of the value of freedom. It is because I was afraid of you that he lies unconscious in the med-bay, the victim of a drug I gave him, the same drug with which I kept your mind clouded all these years. He will not recover and you will never have the chance to use me again. One way or another, I am finally free of you. The luxury of your quarters was certainly a different prison than the yachenka to which others from Resenka were sentenced, but it was still a prison. I am willing to die in this ship rather than live any longer as your slave.”

Moss-Kuib shuddered visibly at the mention of the Earth Man’s name. Hearing Kirk spoken of openly seemed to rouse him. He turned to his right and barked an order: “Weapons officer, target that ship and fire!”

The weapons officer hesitated and Moss-Kuib jumped to his feet, raced to the weapons position and hurled the surprised officer to the floor. Organ Moss-Kuib activated the targeting computer and a bolt of phased energy streaked toward the tiny ship.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Mr. Spock,” Ensign Chekov said, barely containing the excitement in his voice, “the Wargon ship has fired on their space station. The effect of their phaser blast seems to have triggered a chain reaction. The entire station is collapsing!”

“Full magnification on the viewer, Mr. Sulu,” Spock ordered.

No sound travels through the vacuum of space. That fact did not stop Leonard McCoy from believing that he could hear the screams of dying creatures, their bodies burned by flames or torn apart in the explosions that were destroying their space station. The compassion for life, no matter how alien, no matter the fact that they had kidnaped his Captain, caused McCoy pain. The conflagration he saw on the screen filled him with grief.

“Dear God!” McCoy said.

“I don’t think God has anything to do with that,” Lieutenant Uhura said, her rich mahogany face seemed to be several shades paler as she watched the destruction of the Vargon orbital platform.

“He’s been blamed for more of our own stupidity than we would ever admit, Nyota,” McCoy agreed.

Doctor McCoy started to ask if there was anything the *Enterprise* could do to assist when the *Repelator* spun 180 degrees on its axis and dove straight for them.

“Shields at maximum,” Spock ordered. “Mr. Chekov take the weapons console and fire across their path. Two shots, full intensity. Try to warn them off.”

Before Ensign Chekov could reach his station, a phaser blast shot out from the leading edge of the *Repelator* and raced towards the *Enterprise*. The beam impacted the forward shields with a force like nothing they had ever experienced before.

Scotty pulled himself to his feet and quickly assessed the damage.

“Shields lost 34 percent of their power with that single blast, Mr. Spock. We’ll lose even more if they hit us again at this range.”

“Withdraw Mr. Sulu,” Spock ordered, his voice as calm as if he were strolling through the ship’s corridors on his way to a chess game with his Captain. The urgency of the situation was not lost on anyone on the bridge, however.

“Full reverse,” Sulu responded. “I’ll try to put some distance between us and them. I’m setting a course for Alycone IV. Engineering, I need warp capability.”

Montgomery Scott had been concentrating his repair efforts on the shields and missed the first flash of a warp engine indicator. As he turned a heartbeat later to look at the light, Lieutenant Singh called from engineering, his voice the antithesis of Spock’s Vulcan calm.

“Belay that warp order!” he shouted and Sulu’s hands instantly froze above the control panel.

“Mr. Spock, I’ve been monitoring the bridge and we don’t dare go into warp, not now at least. The dilithium sequencer is off-line and the matter-antimatter flow regulator is showing a force two imbalance. If we go into warp, we risk an engine implosion.”

“I see it,” Scott said. “Shut down the matter-antimatter flow. Quickly lad, before the tri-particle sequencer is crushed in the stream!”

“Best speed under impulse, Mr. Sulu,” Spock said. “We are much too close to that ship.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Commander Koba, the *Enterprise* is under attack. My readings indicate they have shut down their warp engines,” the Romulan helmsman reported crisply.

“Then we have him,” Koba said with evident satisfaction. “Drop our cloak and move in.”

Where there had been only stars, shimmering slightly behind the distortion of the Romulan cloaking device, there now hung a Romulan Bird of Prey, glistening white in the reflection of Alycone Prime. As the *Black Inferno* began to move toward the battle, the weapons officer warned, “Commander, we are being fired upon. An alien ship has targeted both us and the *Enterprise*. Sensors indicate they have fired two plasma energy torpedoes at us. The Federation ship has taken a direct hit with what appears to be hyper-disruptors.”

“Evasive,” Koba ordered, “pattern Craton-Delta Three.”

The Bird of Prey seemed to simply fall towards her starboard side. One moment she was stationary, the next moment she was dropping away from where the Vargon shots had been aimed. The first torpedo flew by overhead, but the second compensated for the maneuver and detonated 100 kilometers off the *Black Inferno's* bow. The explosion rocked the ship, but did not do severe damage. The defensive screens held.

The explosion knocked the Centurion to the deck. He tried to get to his feet, but sat down roughly, his back propped against the central command console. His face was streaked with green blood.

Koba quickly knelt at his friend's side and wiped the green blood away with the back of his own hand.

"Your head is hard, my old friend," Koba said.

The Centurion saw his blood on Koba's hand and said, "Not hard enough, I think."

From behind him, the helmsman reported, "The alien is firing on Kirk's ship again. I do not think they will be able to take more than two additional hits. If they use the plasma device which struck us, they will surely be destroyed."

"That will leave us to face the alien alone," the Centurion said.

Koba nodded and stood to his feet.

"Open a channel to the *Enterprise*. Offer our assistance. When we finish these cowards who shoot without warning, then we can deal with our old enemy. For the

honor of the Praetor, I want the blow that finishes Kirk's ship to come from the *Black Inferno*. For now, we need each other."

Koba turned to his weapons officer and ordered, "Target the alien and fire disruptors, maximum intensity, maximum duration!"

*Doctors had told me years ago that something was wrong inside of my body and I could never bear children. They were the ones who were wrong! Obolen went with me the last time I went to Ingal-Karbe. We spent only two nights away from Zenyuk, but on the second night, our daughter was conceived.*

*Genrikh and Zalygin called on me often, and I despised myself every time one of them touched me, but I knew if I refused them once, they would go after Anatorr. After he was dead, I stopped caring, but my submission to them kept me alive. They did not come around when it was the way of women with me, so I know that the baby I bore was Obolen's daughter.*

*After Anatorr died, Obolen showed great kindness towards me (Obolen told me that Anatorr went back to Lubeme, and although it was painful at first for them both, they rebuilt their relationship. I was glad to hear they had enough time to find happiness together. Happiness is such a precious commodity on Resenka).*

*Gradually, I came to know that Obolen's feelings progressed beyond simple kindness. As the days passed into months and then into a year, I longed for the touch of a man who would love me, not just use me. Obolen, I knew, would be such a man. The first time he spoke of his feelings to me I told him I could not yet accept his proposal. There was no logical reason for it, but then love is not logical. Another year passed before he spoke of his feelings again. That time I went to him gladly.*

*When Zalygin and Genrikh learned that I was with child, they took turns beating me. I guess they were trying to kill the baby. Maybe it was simple anger at me because I had let another man share my bed. Maybe it was just their inborn cruelty. At any rate, they eventually tired of their game. Mercifully, as my body began to swell with the new life inside, they lost all interest in me.*

*They even stopped trying to learn the identity of the child's father, and I never told them. If they don't find this diary, they will never know. I know it is a risk, but when I am gone, I want someone to know of Obolen's kindness and his love. Early in my time, Obolen guessed that the baby was his. I started to deny it, trying to protect him, but I knew he deserved the truth. Someday, I want our daughter to know who her father is. I have asked the Holy Ones to give her the friendship with her father that I never knew with mine.*

*After our baby drew in her first breath and saluted the world with a lusty cry, her father named her. Holding her for the first time he said to me, "Her skin is so soft."*

*I laughed, "Obolen, babies are supposed to have soft skin. It is part of being a baby."*

*He laughed back at me, "I don't remember being a baby. I was too young at the time."*

*Then he smiled at our daughter and said, "There is an old word that will be your new name. It means 'Soft One.'"*

*Two months after the Soft One came to live with us, an assassination plot against the Poles of Zenyuk and Ingal-Karbe was uncovered. I had not known of the plan, nor taken any part in its formation, but that information did not matter to the ExComm who made the arrests. One of the Others was known to me and that was enough. Strangely, and thankfully, Obolen was not arrested.*

*I am forced to sleep, when I am allowed to sleep, with a light always on in my cell. I am forced to sleep with my arms outside of the covers, for fear, they say, that I will try to strangle myself. I am fed one meal a day – if bread and thin potato broth can be called a meal (once there was even an actual piece of potato in the broth). I am allowed to go to the tualyet only once a day and that is just after Adzeva rises in the morning. That trip to the tualyet is the only time I am allowed outside of my cell and so it is my only exercise period.*

*The ExComm has many methods to induce a prisoner to sign a confession, but knowing that I will never see my daughter again is worse than anything physical they could do to me. And I have little doubt that when they are finished with their psychological attacks, I will feel their methods of interrogation in my body. I now believe what Zalygin told me that day in Levaki's office – death, when it actually comes, will be a comfort.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“We’re being hailed, Mr. Spock,” Lieutenant Uhura said, her voice full of astonishment. “It’s the Romulan commander.”

“On screen, Miss Uhura,” Spock said evenly.

“Vulcan, for an eater of roots and berries, you seem to acquire interesting enemies. However, I see that you are in trouble. Do not fire on me. I am bringing the *Black Inferno* to your assistance.”

“Commander Koba, what do you have in mind?”

“A small device, recently installed on all Romulan Warbirds,” Koba lied. The weapon he was about to fire had been detonated successfully only once when fired from a starship. The other four times it had been attempted, it had destroyed the vessels that were making the tests.

Koba looked away from the view screen and gave an order to his weapons officer.

A burst of red energy plasma shot away from the forward weapons bay of the *Black Inferno*. Immediately after launch, Koba ordered his vessel to turn hard to port and accelerate. Seeing the flash, Moss-Kuib brought his hyper-disruptors to bear, but they deflected harmlessly off the advancing super weapon. Less than two seconds later, the Romulan weapon detonated against the shields of the *Repelator*.

“Fascinating,” Spock said, his voice carrying more appreciation for the Romulan device than he had wished to display. “They appear to have used a tricoetrycine missile.”

“Borgasfrat,” Scotty snorted, “tricoetrycine is possible only in theory.”

“Evidently the Romulans are unaware of that, Mr. Scott,” Spock answered evenly.

Scotty looked up from his console, his face full of appreciation. “Aye, Mr. Spock, and judging from the damage they inflicted on the Vargons, I’m glad they dinna know it was impossible.”

Sulu spoke next.

“The Vargon’s shields are down. If Pavel still has a lock on those human life signs, we can beam him out of there.”

“Sensors are locked on,” Chekov reported.

Spock hit the comm-switch.

“Transporter room, lock onto Mr. Chekov’s science station and retrieve the human at the indicated coordinates. Emergency medical team to the transporter room.”

Doctor Leonard McCoy was already on his way to the turbolift. He paused at the doors long enough to lock eyes with Commander Spock.

“I’ll signal you as soon as transport is complete,” he said as the doors closed in front of him.

Spock turned back to the view screen and said, “Spock to Koba. Do you have another of those weapons at your disposal?”

The Romulan commander's face replaced the view of the Vargon ship. "We will fire again as soon as the launch sequencer completes its recycle."

Koba broke the connection and the *Repelator* once again filled the view screen.

"Well," Sulu commented, "we may just have learned something valuable about that weapon. I'm not sure Koba meant to tell us he needs time to reload."

"That could be a mistake," Chekov interjected, "because the *Repelator* is moving again. What kind of ship could take a hit like that and still survive?"

"One we desperately need to disable," Uhura said.

"Load photon torpedoes. Launch a full spread," Spock ordered.

"Torpedoes away," Chekov answered. "Impact in five seconds. Three. Two. One. Now!"

Once again the *Repelator* rocked under alien weapons fire. This time, however, they quickly targeted the *Enterprise* and returned fire.

Scotty looked up from his panel and said, "Shields are holding at 57 percent. The Romulan Tri-C missile and our torpedoes seem to have taken something out of him."

Moments later Commander Koba was back on screen.

"Vulcan, I suggest we launch a coordinated attack. I can transmit coordinates directly to your weapons fire control."

"Mr. Scott, I prefer that you supervise this. Set your panel's frequencies to receive Commander Koba's data."

“Ready, Mr. Spock,” the Scotsman replied.

“Transmit data, Commander,” Spock ordered.

“Data received,” Scotty said. “I am targeting now. Ready, Mr. Spock.”

“Commander Koba, at your command, sir.”

“Fire!” Koba ordered and photon torpedoes raced away from the *Enterprise* and a tricoetrycine missile leapt from the *Black Inferno*.

On board the *Black Inferno*, the weapons officer turned to face his commander, his face white with fear.

“Sir, my instruments show an overload in the Gamma 71 readings. Advise retreat immediately.”

“I will not run away when victory is imminent. Besides, if your readings are correct, we do not have time to flee.”

The Federation torpedoes and the Romulan missile struck the *Repelator* simultaneously. The resulting explosion disabled the *Enterprise*'s optical sensors, knocking them off-line and rendering the ship effectively blind. The crew of the Federation vessel felt the force of the explosion, however, as the giant starship was propelled backward by an energy wave as though she were under power.

One of the design flaws which the Romulans had failed to eliminate from their new missile proved fatal to their ship as well. The force of the explosion was directed directly back at the *Black Inferno*, thanks to the overload the helm officer had detected.

The *Black Inferno* was not completely destroyed, but neither would it ever return to the Romulan home world.

The fate of the *Repelator* was not so kind. The twin explosions had hurled the enormous vessel upward out of planetary orbit. With all engineering systems destroyed, the ship was propelled towards their sun. As the gravity of Alycone Prime overtook the dead hulk, it pulled the helpless ship into its glowing corona where it instantly vaporized.

In one space battle, Vargon was been deprived of its entire space faring capabilities. The Battle Dock was nothing more than an orbiting collection of debris. The Time Chamber which had been used to torture James Kirk and so many other helpless victims was incinerated along with the ship which housed it. The *Repelator*, the pride of the Vargon Sovereign, was gone, and with it his only means of interplanetary domination. The few orbital vehicles which were on the surface of Vargon did not have the capability of generating gravitational escape velocity. It would be a long time before the Vargons would venture into space again. When that day came, the rest of the galaxy would meet them armed and prepared.

Onboard the *Black Inferno*, death was everywhere. The explosion had torn away the forward edge of the vessel, exposing hundreds of Romulans, including Commander Koba, to death in the vacuum of space. Overloaded systems in their engineering pods had killed hundreds more. Only in the medical facilities at the well-shielded center of the vessel did anyone still live. One of those who survived was the Centurion. It was

he who answered Commander Spock's hail. And unlike a Romulan commander the *Enterprise* had met earlier in her five year mission, this man did not order the destruction of his vehicle. Such an order would have been beyond the capabilities of his crew, even if he had chosen honorable suicide.

Before Mr. Spock could offer assistance to the wounded Romulan vessel, Leonard McCoy signaled from the transporter room.

"Spock," the Doctor's voice seemed to be light years away, not merely several hundreds meters below the bridge of the *Enterprise*. The Vulcan knew immediately from the tone of the Doctor's voice what his next words would be.

"It is the Captain," Spock said, his voice more hollow, more devoid of emotion than anyone on the bridge had ever heard.

"Yes, it's Jim! But he's barely alive. I'm on my way to sickbay. Join me there when you can."

"Understood, Doctor," Spock said and he broke the connection.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lieutenants Vincent DeSalle and Nyota Uhura led an emergency rescue party to what remained of the *Black Inferno*. Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott had each warned that the structural integrity of the Romulan vessel would soon disintegrate. But neither would order the boarding party to remain on the *Enterprise*. With all of the electronic and magnetic interference still in the area, the results of the recent weapons explosions, the shuttlecraft *Copernicus* was the only way to remove any Romulans who remained alive.

The *Black Inferno* still had one functioning docking port. Scotty and DeSalle quickly devised a universal docking collar since it was obvious that the two ships could not mate perfectly. Hikaru Sulu insisted on flying the *Copernicus*, because, he said, maintaining a hard dock would be more difficult than navigating the few thousand kilometers between the two ships.

When the medics stepped into the *Black Inferno*, they were almost overwhelmed with the death and destruction they witnessed. One medic commented that the name of the Romulan ship had been prophetic. No one smiled. There was too much misery and suffering around them.

Working as fast as they could, and using all of their considerable skill, the *Enterprise* medics were able to save only nine Romulans. The Centurion was one of those, but with the gallantry of an old time ship's captain, he insisted on being the last one off of his ship. His chivalry almost proved fatal when a section of the crippled ship collapsed, causing the *Copernicus* to lurch away from the *Black Inferno*. Sulu fought the controls, but maintained a hard dock.

When the shuttlecraft's door slid closed, Sulu released the controls and allowed his tiny ship to drift away from the wreckage, propelled only by navigational thrusters. He flew carefully back to the *Enterprise* where, as soon as the hanger bay doors closed and the bay was pressurized, the casualties were met by a triage team. Despite their best efforts, five more Romulans died in flight. The survival of two more was problematical.

With the last of the injured Romulans resting in sickbay, Sulu moved the *Enterprise* into stationary orbit around Resenka. Ensign Chekov activated the ship's tractor beam and brought the lifeless *Isaac Newton* onboard. Mr. Spock immediately ordered Chekov to access the Captain's log. It filled in many of the missing days and pieces from the training mission, including the fates of their three crewmen, but it did nothing to ease the grief of the those who mourned Lieutenant Jackson Shelton, Ensign Berek, and Ensign Bakor K'Yle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Vulcan Science Officer's posture changed only slightly, indicating that he was aware that someone had entered the isolation room of sickbay.

"Dr. McCoy?" he asked as the Chief Medical Officer moved quietly up behind him.

"Yes, Spock," McCoy answered and then added, "From the way you were standing there, I thought you were praying." The Doctor's voice was free of the banter which frequently characterized, and often defined, their relationship.

"Vulcans have great regard for metaphysics, Doctor. We even recognize an after-life of what you would call 'the soul.' But we do not evoke requests of an unseen deity."

"That's too bad, Spock. We humans have often found comfort in evoking Deity," McCoy replied, automatically recognizing an opportunity to bait his friend, and then just as quickly, letting it pass.

“I do not disapprove of the practice, Doctor. I merely state it is not a part of Vulcan ritual.”

“Indeed,” McCoy said, almost Spock-like.

Then he added, “Tell me about the Vulcan soul, Spock.”

The speed with which the First Officer answered was surprising to the Doctor, especially remembering the Vulcan’s reticence in discussing other personal matters, such as pon farr, the Vulcan mating ritual.

“We call it our katra,” Spock said. “When death is imminent we select someone close to us – emotionally close you would say, rather than someone whose physical presence happened to be in the immediate vicinity. That person then carries our katra within his own mind until a place of rest and safety for the one who is passing out of this existence is attained.”

The Vulcan paused and then continued, “Forgive me, Doctor McCoy, if I say no more. This is a subject we rarely discuss, even among ourselves. My concern about the Captain’s condition has caused me to speak inappropriately.”

“That’s all right, Spock. But personally, I can’t imagine anyone as logical as a Vulcan asking me to carry his katra. The resultant ‘torrent of emotions,’ as you would call it, would no doubt be unsettling to the dearly departed.”

“On the contrary, Doctor. A Vulcan might logically find someone with your capacity for compassion to be extremely soothing during the passage.”

McCoy started to reply, but recognized that Spock had, very uncharacteristically, given his friend a glimpse behind what the Doctor often called, "Your damned Vulcan mask."

When McCoy spoke again he said, "Is that what you were doing? Searching for Jim's katra. I saw your fingers touching his face in the pattern of the Vulcan mind meld."

Spock had not realized the Doctor had noticed the gesture.

"You surmise correctly, Doctor. But the Captain's life-essence is almost undetectable. We have had Jim back onboard for two days now, and in spite of your considerable medical skill, still he slips away from us. I sensed that what we call James Kirk still lives inside this body, but I cannot reach him. Outside of my own mind, I know our Captain better than any other being in our galaxy, but it is as if he has retreated to a place of safety, built a secure fortress and raised all barriers against penetration. I did not think humans were capable of such a defense."

"Well, Spock, let's just hope we can induce Jim to surrender that defense."

"You might have said, 'Pray,' Doctor. It appears we will need considerable assistance."

*One jailer, an old woman, has shown me consideration. By writing of her, even if I do not name her, I can show her my gratitude for her kindnesses. She often gives me a smile. When I walk outside, she sometimes touches my shoulder in a gesture of comfort. Once or twice she has been able to hide a piece of meat in my potato soup. This morning she brought me a basin of water and a small piece of soap. She said she thought I would like to wash my hands and face because I have a visitor. I will write this one last time and give my diary to the one who comes.*

*The interrogators did not come last night. For the first night since I was put in this cell, they turned the light off and let me sleep curled up on my side. There is no way to describe the sheer joy of being allowed to put my hands under the cover!*

*I slept all night long, not once was I awakened, not even by a dream. The sound of the key twisting in the lock woke me and I went out into the prison yard and lined up for the tualyet. One of the humiliations of the yachenka is that all prisoners, male and female, must use the same facilities.*

*The jailer brought me breakfast – it is hard to call it the morning meal, because it is the only meal of the day, but even here, some habits remain. The bread was fresh, and not one piece but two. The broth was hot and steamy (not an easy task with the Snow Princess howling fiercely outside) and filled with pieces of meat and potatoes! It was a veritable feast. When I looked at the tray the old woman brought me, I laughed*

*and asked her if this was my last meal. When she quickly sat down the tray and walked away, I stopped laughing.*

*At least, I thought to myself, I will die with a full stomach. I ate rapidly, not really taking time to savor the meal. I was afraid someone would come in and take it away before I could consume everything. As I finished I smiled and asked my empty cell, "Is death on a full stomach to be preferred over death on an empty stomach?"*

*Moments later I heard footsteps in the hallway and a familiar voice said, "Elena, the jailer said I could visit you. I hope you will see me." And Lubeme stepped into my cell.*

*I stumbled to my feet, knocked over the chair which I turned to face the bed and used for a table, and scattered my utensils onto the floor. We stood there for a long moment, just looking at each other, then Lubeme closed the distance between us and hugged me. When she started to step back, I clung to her with all of my strength and she returned the gesture. Both of our faces were wet with tears when we finally broke the embrace.*

*I could think of nothing meaningful to say. Stupidly I said, "I am going to die today."*

*"I heard," Lubeme said, "that is why I begged them to let me see you."*

*"Why did you wish to see me?" I asked, my voice showing genuine surprise. "I caused you such great pain."*

*"That is all forgiven, Elena. I wanted to tell you that."*

*She looked at me for the longest time and then spoke again, rushing her words as though she were afraid something would stop her before she had completed her speech.*

*“And I have a selfish reason for coming to see you. Anatorr and I had a daughter, but she denounced us to the Bolskars years ago. She moved to Megin, I do not even know if she still lives. So you see, when you are gone, my last link to Anatorr will be gone.*

*“We had such a short time after you sent him home, but those days were the happiest I have ever known. They erased the memories of all the bad times. Thank you for those days, Elena. I know he would have said, ‘Princess.’”*

*“You even know his special name for me,” I said, “and still you extend forgiveness.”*

*“I knew he had a ‘Princess’ before I knew she had a name. He talked in his sleep.”*

*“Yes,” I said, “I remember,” and I started to cry.*

*“Stop it, Elena,” Lubeme said, but her voice was gentle. “They will not let me stay much longer. Tell me how I can comfort you. Ask me anything. If it is within my power, it will happen.”*

*“Give me time to write a few pages,” I said. “I’ve been keeping a diary and I want you to take it out with you. The jailer will never see it if you tuck it under your heavy coat. Read it if you wish and then give it to Obolen. He is caring for my baby. Help*

*him with her. He is good with wood, but the Soft One may be more than he can handle.”*

*Lubeme nodded, then she asked, “How have you written a diary in the yachenka? And how do you keep it from the ExComm?”*

*“The ExComm allow us to have a few sheets of paper each week,” I explained. “We may write letters to the outside, but the ExComm reads every word. When I realized that they do not count the number of sheets you pass back to them, I began to save and hide extra paper – there is a loose seam at the foot of the mattress-pad, and it opens to reveal my secret place. Shortly after I began this diary, Obolen visited me, and I asked him to bring me more paper. He visits as often as the ExComm will permit, and although they almost always take the writing paper he brings, they always allow him to bring small personal items like winter stockings, or a hair brush. Sometimes he is permitted to give me food, hard cheese is my favorite. And he wraps these gifts in heavy brown paper which the ExComm fails to confiscate. It evidently does not occur to them that this paper which holds gifts, will also hold my words.”*

*“Is there anyone else I can speak to?” Lubeme asked.*

*“Get word to Keeper Lared in Ingal-Karbe if you can. Tell him when it is over. I would like for him to speak to the Holy Ones. I may need his assistance with them to get to Neyba. I don’t know if they let such people as me into their Eternal City.”*

*“I will do it all. And if the Holy Ones do not welcome you to Neyba, I do not wish to go there when I die.”*

*Lubeme turned away and although she made no sound, I knew she was crying. When I have finished these final pages, I will add them to the others, and then it will be time to go. For both of us.*

*Anatorr, my beloved, I will see you soon. I pray that you, too, will have forgiven me.*

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lieutenant Uhura hesitated to disturb Mr. Spock, but not to call him with her news would be, well, illogical. Spock would deny any emotional concern about the Captain. If that was the way he dealt with his grief, so be it. Uhura knew her information could not wait and so she signaled the Vulcan and located him in his quarters.

“I know you are meditating, Mr. Spock, but there is a matter of importance on the bridge.”

“I am on my way, Lieutenant,” and before Uhura could close the channel Spock added, “I did not know that you were clairvoyant, Miss Uhura.”

“It was only logical to assume that you were in meditation at a time like this.”

“Logical? Perhaps Doctor McCoy has failed to infect the entire crew with his wild, emotional discharges. I do find that comforting. I will join you on the bridge shortly. Spock out.”

And he broke the connection before Uhura could reply.

When he stepped out of the turbolift, Commander Spock immediately noticed the small craft at the center of the viewscreen.

“There is one individual on that ship, Mr. Spock. Mr. Chekov has scanned the surface of the world below and I have been listening in on their old-style radio signals. They call their planet Resenka and they designate their race by the same name. Based on what Pavel has learned, I believe that there is a Resenka female on that ship.”

“Try to hail her, Lieutenant.”

“I have already tried, but that was several minutes ago. There is indication that she may have tried to respond, but was unable to do so because of communicator difficulties. The ship’s hull is scored, as if it had been subjected to an explosion, or fire, or both.”

“Boost your gain and try again, Miss Uhura.”

Uhura did as instructed. When the universal hailing frequencies were opened she said, “This is the *U.S.S. Enterprise* calling unidentified Resenka craft. Open a channel, please. We mean you no harm.”

For a moment the only reply to Uhura’s signal was static, then a decidedly feminine voice came over the speaker.

“My name is Myahkee. Did you say the *Enterprise*? Are you James Kirk’s ship?”

“Yes we are,” Uhura said excitedly. “How do you know our Captain?”

“We were,” she paused for a moment, then continued, “together, briefly.”

Spock joined the conversation.

“This is Commander Spock in temporary command of the *Enterprise*. We have read the Captain’s logs. Were you and Captain Kirk together on the Vargon ship the *Repelator*, which was commanded by one Moss-Kuib?”

“You speak of Moss-Kuib as one who has ceased existence. Is that true?”

“He perished when his ship fell into the gravitational pull of your sun.”

“Then all of Vargon and all of Resenka are in your debt, *Enterprise*.”

“Myahkee, what happened to your vessel?” Uhura asked. “Were you part of Moss-Kuib’s crew?”

Myahkee replied with an ironic, humorless laugh.

“Crew? Not hardly, *Enterprise*. I was removed from Resenka and selected for special duty, half a lifetime ago. I was Moss-Kuib’s prisoner. I spent only a short time with James, but I saw how hard he fought for his freedom, for his life. When the executioners took him away that final time, I decided that death was preferable to the life Moss-Kuib had given me.

“I killed two guards and stole this ship. Moss-Kuib tried to kill me, but my reflexes were a little faster than his. When I realized he was targeting my descent pod, I fired the reentry rockets. The sudden propulsion threw me out of his targeting zone. When his weapons destroyed the Battle Dock, the explosion disabled my ship. The blast propelled me away from Vargon, but all my ship’s controls were useless.”

Commander Spock was about to suggest that Myahkee transport onto the *Enterprise* when Dr. McCoy burst onto the bridge.

“Spock, I’m sorry to interrupt whatever you are doing, but I think I may have found a key to saving Jim’s life.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Early that morning, McCoy reported, he had been wandering around the ship, waiting for the results of yet another series of tests on the Captain’s physical condition.

The Doctor had gone into the shuttle bay to see if he could find a clue, anything, on the *Isaac Newton* that they might have missed.

“As you know, Spock, I’ve tried Masiform D, I’ve tried Cordrazine. I’ve tried everything I can think of. The way those bastards worked him over, it’s a miracle he is still alive. There was evidence of massive internal trauma, broken bones, the list just goes on and on. They evidently healed his injuries and then reinflicted them. I’ve never seen such torture.

“I was so distracted, I don’t even know what Nurse Chapel was working on at the moment I walked into the hanger bay. It is the only time since we beamed Jim back onboard that I’ve left sickbay. I went inside the shuttlecraft and examined the equipment locker and found the survival gear that Jim or somebody modified for wear on that arctic world we’re orbiting at the moment. I noticed the discharged phasers and remembering a similar experience when you were in command of a shuttlecraft, figured they had used the phasers to power-up the Newton’s batteries.”

“All of that was in evidence before, Doctor,” Spock said.

“Of course it was, Spock. I was looking for a needle in a haystack. Anyway, I was sitting there in the command chair and I remembered that Jim had told you and me about his personal security code. I wondered if he had hidden anything in the computer that he might not wish someone else to find.”

“Excellent thinking, Doctor. Ship’s logs are almost immediately accessible, but the possibilities of uncovering Jim’s personal code are 3,628,800 to one, if he used each of the integers, zero through nine, only once in the nine digit code.”

“But Jim used some of the numbers more than once and some of them not at all,” McCoy said. “Therefore his code would be unbreakable unless someone with a sophisticated computer attacked the problem. Anyway, I put his code in the terminal, and I found a most remarkable diary. Jim’s introduction indicated that the volume originated on the world below. Someone he met named Obolen had shared the document with him and Jim had scanned it with the tricorder and then dumped it into the *Newton’s* computer.”

“They call their world ‘Resenka.’” Uhura interjected.

McCoy nodded, “I found that in my reading, Nyota.”

“There is a point to this narrative, Doctor?” Spock asked.

“Of course there is, and if everyone would stop interrupting me, I’d get there a lot sooner.”

“I doubt that, Doctor, but do continue.”

“I ordered a hard copy of the document and took it back to sickbay with me to read while I waited for some sign of improvement in Jim. The chronicle is an autobiography called *The Diary of Elena*, and it is the most, excuse me Spock, fascinating story. It chronicles her extraordinary adventures. From Jim’s notes, I believe that the survival of her diary may be a key factor in overthrowing the tyrannical government now in power. Elena is something of a heroine, a genuine force for freedom, and...”

“...and her relationship with Captain Kirk is,” Spock interrupted.

“Dammit, Spock! I’m coming to it. Elena talks about a drug called pahodja, a plant actually. According to local legend it can be used to induce forgetfulness, perhaps even a comatose state. If Jim somehow ingested that plant, and if we can find it, I think I can develop an antidote.”

“We may have found someone who can help us, Doctor,” Spock said, then added, “Miss Uhura, do you still have a channel to that pilot?”

“Yes, Mr. Spock,” Uhura answered, her fingers dancing over her communications board. “Ship to ship is now open, sir.”

“Myahkee, this is Commander Spock. Captain Kirk placed a chronicle called *The Diary of Elena* in his logs. Dr. Leonard McCoy, our Chief Medical Officer, has read it. He says the diary describes a plant called ‘pahodja.’ It is his belief that the pahodja may have caused the Captain’s current physical condition.”

“Commander Spock,” Myahkee interrupted excitedly. “I know the diary. Elena was my mother. It was I who gave James the pahodja. But you said he still lives. How is that possible!”

“Myahkee, would you mind telling me why you drugged our Captain,” McCoy demanded. “You’ve nearly killed him.”

“I am unfamiliar with your medical science, sir, but what I did may actually have saved James’ life. Moss-Kuib had sentenced him to death by torture. When I gave James the pahodja, the Organ actually ordered his healers to attempt to save him. If they had continued their ‘execution,’ James would have been dead by now.”

“It seems, Myahkee, that I owe you an apology and our greatest gratitude,” McCoy said. “But is there an antidote to your pahodja?”

“Yes, Doctor, there is. And I would be most happy to help you secure it for James.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Leonard McCoy and Mr. Spock were standing on opposite sides of Jim Kirk’s bed. Since they had returned from Resenka and synthesized the antidote, the readings had steadily improved. Jim would recover.

“Do you think we did the right thing, Spock?”

“Are you referring to the Romulan Centurion, Doctor?”

“Yes. Are you certain we should have allowed him to accompany Myahkee and then remain behind on Resenka?”

“Doctor, there was little we could have done to have stopped him. Except, of course, arrested him and confined him to the brig. But we had no jurisdiction over him, or over this world, in any case.”

“Did he explain his reasoning to you?”

“I was most surprised when the Centurion confided in me. Years ago he lost his family in a raid by Orion pirates. He withdrew to the Romulan home world where he tried to bury his grief in the tedium of a meaningless position. It was at that time that he discovered Koba, a rising young commander who showed great promise. As was his

right as a Centurion, he requested assignment to the Commander's ship, the *Black Inferno*. Now Koba, too, is dead."

"So the Centurion joined the Others to seek revenge?" McCoy asked.

"That is what I asked him. He quoted a Klingon proverb and then said, 'When it is consumed, revenge leaves a bitter taste in the mouth and a fire in the belly,'"

"Was that it?"

"No, he said it was time to leave revenge to the Elements. He has had a lifetime of destruction. Now, together with the Others, he has a chance to build."

The Doctor and the Science Officer stood quietly for a time, watching the diagnostic readings above Jim's bed.

"Do you think they will find Gernet?" McCoy asked.

"I would think so, Doctor," Spock answered. "Obolen and his daughter impressed me with their resourcefulness. And I believe that the Centurion will be a welcome addition to the Others."

"He and Obolen seemed to have formed an instant friendship. Together, that trio will be have positive impact on Resenka."

"Myahkee already has, Doctor. She initiated the chain of events which brought about the destruction of the Vargon starship, and their entire interplanetary transport capabilities, the death of Organ Moss-Kuib, and the rescue of Captain Kirk."

"A lot like her mother, it would seem," McCoy said "I wish we could have known Elena."

Neither McCoy nor Spock had noticed that their Captain had opened his eyes and was looking up at them. They both looked down immediately when a very weak, but decidedly healing James T. Kirk asked, "Who is Elena?"

Spock said, "She is the young woman who saved your life."

"Along with her daughter, Myahkee," McCoy added.

Jim wrinkled his forehead without comprehension. The pahodja had done its work.

McCoy smiled and said, "It's okay Jim. It's a long story and one that Spock and I will be glad to tell you."

"Two most remarkable young women," Spock said.

"Both Jim's type," McCoy said.

"Indeed," Spock replied, his eyebrow arched, relief and gratitude sneaking through his Vulcan reserves.

But the Captain had once again closed his eyes. This time to sleep. His first real sleep in a very long time.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The conditions which I describe as existing inside of Resenka's yachenkas are based on incidents recorded by Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. Also, the story of the ovation given to the Streloxx Leader was adapted from an incident which Solzhenitsyn recorded. His truths are much more frightening than any fiction I have imagined.