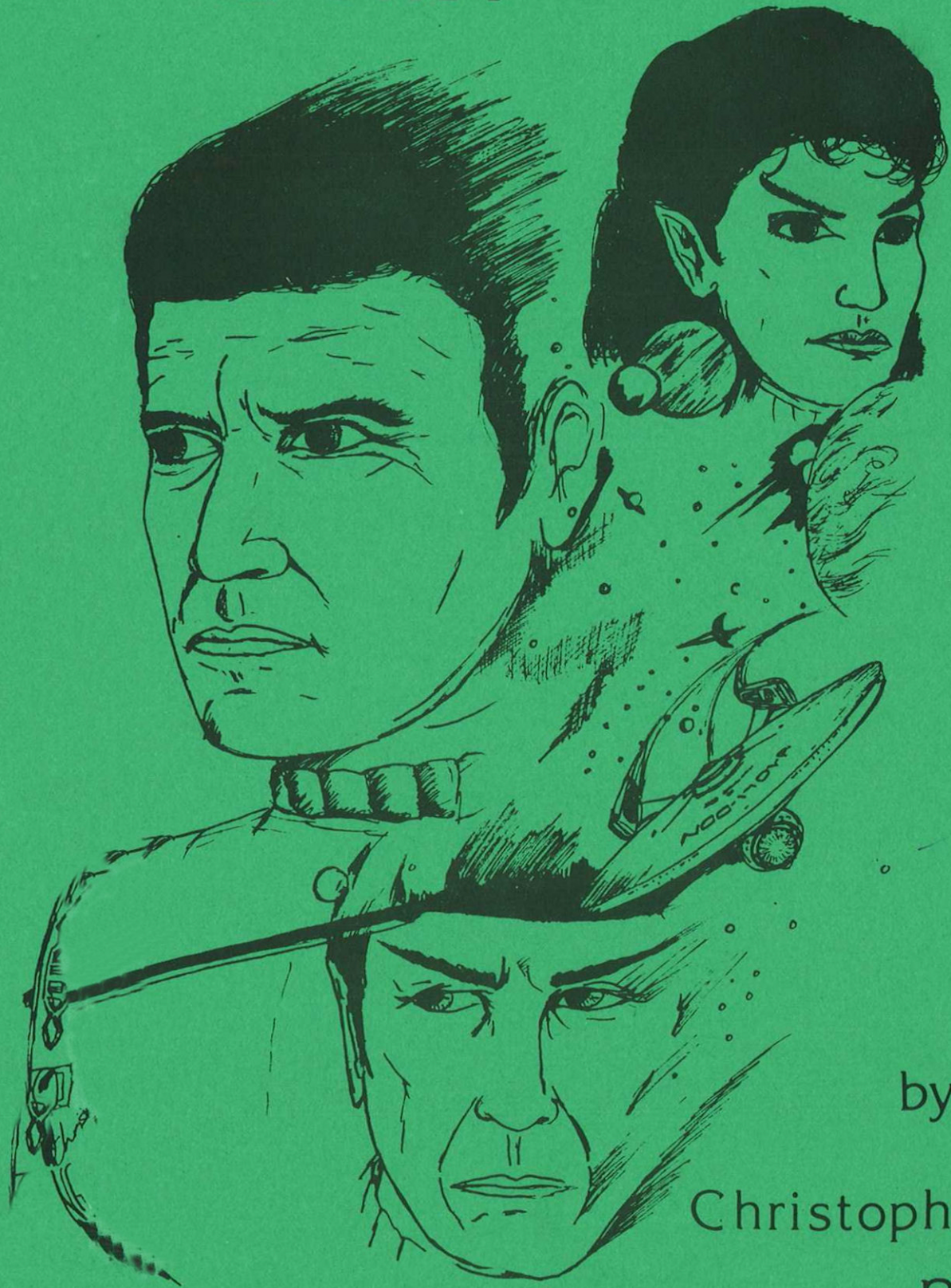


IDIC LOG 2

IDIC

ECHOES OF THE PAST



by

Christopher

Ng

a Star Trek fanzine

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An IDIC publication

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Printing of Masters - Janet Quarton
Printing - Urban Print
Distracting - Shona & Cindy

IDIC LOG 2: ECHOES OF THE PAST in which the Excelsior's crew has disappeared and the search for them leads Kirk and his crew into terrible danger is put out by IDIC and is available from -

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ECHOES OF THE PAST

Dedicated to all my family and also to Richard and Marion Van der Voort of "At The Sign of the Dragon", without whose help this story might not have been written. I would also like to thank Angela Berry for her stunning looks to appear as an illustration for my book.

CHAPTER ONE

A large space vessel moved silently and swiftly through the vast emptiness of space and time. Its unusual shape - a very large saucer section supported by its small body known as its secondary hull, with two protruding narrow rectangular engines at either side - showed that its design technology was of a highly advanced nature. Yet throughout the galaxy and beyond there were known to have been vessels which could make this starship look as though it came from the Stone Age. But the occupants of this vessel were content with their own technology, knowing full well that it was only a matter of time before they could make their fantasies a reality. Slowly the huge ship, studded symmetrically with tiny porthole lights on each side, came to a standstill, as it had finally reached its goal.

Captain's Log: Stardate 8393.5

We have reached the edge of the Federation's sphere of influence to investigate an unusual presence in the area, but we have found no evidence to prove this case.

"Sir!" A young female Science Officer spoke, breaking the silence amongst the bridge crew. "We seem to have picked up a small object on our long range scanners." Her words brought some life to the crew, as they had been out too long on this mission, finding nothing startling for them to investigate. Now it seemed their waiting was over and their adventure had just begun!

"On screen, Navigator, full magnification," Captain Styles immediately ordered.

"Aye, sir," said the dark-skinned navigator as he increased the image with a slight adjustment of a switch on his control panel. Quickly the main monitor picture changed its pattern. Faint stars became brighter, planets which appeared like stars were now the size of golf balls. But still there was no indication of any vessel on the screen.

"I can't see anything out there," the Captain said, squinting his eyes for better focus on the large black screen in front of him. "Are you sure that it isn't a reflection of our ship on the scanners?" he asked.

"No, sir," was his Science Officer's confident reply, as she looked back at her science station scanner to double-check her statement, wondering if she had made an error in her judgement. Her readings proved to be true, but in a way irrational. "It seems to have increased its speed to - " pausing a little to set an accurate fix on her monitor readings which slightly fluctuated - "warp speed nine point five, sir."

"Communications, send our greetings and friendship to that vessel in all

languages."

As the message was transmitted across to the unknown ship at regular intervals, its reply was all too sudden.

"Sir, it seems to have fired an energy bolt of some kind at us, yet I cannot determine its composition."

"Red alert, shields up at maximum!"

"Too late, sir, impact just about now...!" exclaimed the Weapons Officer as he stared through his monitor at the projectile heading at them at point blank range. He could do nothing to help the situation as the energy bolt splashed against the ship just as he spoke.

The huge battleship bucked to the left as the bolt of energy impacted on the starboard side, covering the area of impact in a bright, blinding red light which tore a large gash in the ship's secondary hull, leaving small streaks of blue, plasma-like energy which was the residue of the energy bolt sparkling violently around the damaged area. On the bridge, officers were being thrown around like little rag dolls and sparks flew from many of the ship's computer consoles, lighting up the bridge like a miniature firework display. After the attack the Excelsior regained what little power it could muster in retaliation to the sudden attack.

"Damage report!" exclaimed Styles as he wiped away the sweat from his forehead with his right sleeve.

The Science Officer began reading out the ship's status report from the small monitor in front of her. "Loss of power on the secondary hull starboard section, P, Q and R decks have been sealed off due to severe damage, transwarp drive has been disabled as the source of impact was just below the warp nacelle pylon. We only have impulse power, sir."

"Any word from the other ship?" Styles said impatiently.

"Hailing frequencies are still open and there's been no response!" shouted out the Communications Officer over the static of open channels and people from other areas of the ship trying to reach the bridge all at once.

"Engineer, can we maintain our present speed?"

"Negative, Captain, the other engine automatically shuts down to prevent any antimatter imbalance in an emergency," replied the Engineer, who felt helpless at this point.

It took Styles a few minutes to think of a solution to this problem, and he only came up with one simple order.

"Evasive action; lock photon torpedoes on target and fire on my command!" he said abruptly to his weapons officer.

"At what, sir? We can't see it, our sensors were disabled in the attack," replied the Weapons Officer. "If we fire, we could waste our valuable ammunition."

"This is the starship U.S.S. Excelsior, NX-2000, calling Starfleet Command, do you copy?" A voice sounded desperately through the ship's intercom. "This is Captain Styles in command. Our transwarp drive system has been badly damaged and ship's hull has taken a hit but repairs are in progress; we are now only running on impulse power but I am not sure how long it can take the strain, due to the constant attack from our unknown enemy." Captain Styles still spoke on over the universal intercom in the hope that another Federation ship would pick up his

distress call.

"Despite our attempts to contact the opposing vessel, the only reply has been heavy energy fire which has buckled our number four shield and we have many casualties."

Suddenly the Captain's second-in-command cut off his final speech, in high desperation, "Sir, impulse power is down below half power."

"Divert auxiliary power to impulse," Styles ordered abruptly.

"Yes, sir," was his officer's reply.

Styles' voice was cut off again before he could give the vital information. "I've managed to by-pass the damaged sensors circuit, with the Engineer's help, and I now have new information on that vessel. It seems our enemy has an invisible ship - could be some kind of cloaking device."

The Science Officer then shouted out, "Here comes another one."

"Engineering section, can we withstand another attack?" Styles hurriedly asked the officer who was seated at the Engineer's console.

"It's hard to determine, the meters are fluctuating too rapidly for an accurate reading," replied the young officer who looked heavily under strain. In fact the whole crew felt scared and under pressure.

The Science Officer then shouted out to the whole bridge personnel, "Impact in three seconds. Two, one!"

Earth, San Francisco, Stardate 8394.2. The time was twelve noon. The sky slowly began to turn a pale blue colour and the altocumulus clouds slowly drifted away, allowing the sun's bright yellow rays to penetrate through the atmosphere's many protective layers onto the big city. In the salty air a slight breeze could be felt, which permeated around the main tram port situated on the far side of the harbour.

There, waiting at the main tram port platform stood the newly ranked officer Captain James T. Kirk, carrying his important documents ready for his final briefing by his old friend Admiral H. Morrow. He looked out from the port towards the harbour, at the majestic sight of the Golden Gate Bridge rich in its hue of orangey-red colours, and wondered how it had survived for over three hundred years, against the mighty nuclear and eugenic wars of the past. Still Kirk thought how lucky he had been, to receive back his old command - which he had always hoped for while he was Admiral James Kirk, Head of Starfleet Operations. Yet he felt that he didn't miss those days of being glued behind a big desk with his name attached to it, and giving out orders to Starfleet officers and most of the time envying them because he was not out there with them, 'Hopping galaxies,' as Dr. McCoy always sarcastically expressed it.

Now he was putting those memories behind him and looking ahead towards a future of commanding a new Starship again, without trying to twist people's minds to give him his own ship back as he used to do because he found being an Admiral quite boring and unhealthy to him.

"Hey, Jim Kirk!" a man shouted from the crowd of people. In response to his name being shouted from the crowd Kirk quickly turned his head in the direction of the voice.

From the many people who crossed his line of vision, he sifted through the crowd for the person who called his name and only saw one recognisable face in

the crowd, the man who was quickly walking towards him. He was middle-aged, large, and stocky, neatly dressed in his blood-red colour Starfleet uniform, and wearing the four-pointed badge of an Admiral on his right shoulder.

"My god, Admiral Sheer, this is a pleasant surprise!" Kirk called over the noise of the people and the incoming tram flights. Giving a slight grin as a sign of reassurance that he was happy to see an old friend, Kirk slowly walked towards him and, as they met, they greeted each other by shaking hands.

"It's been a while, Jim. I heard you got demoted to Captain a couple of days back." Sheer gave a bright smile, not looking down on Kirk's new rank.

"Well, I finally had the last laugh out of this whole Genesis affair, Paul. It seems I got back what I always wanted, but not in a way that would ruin my long-standing reputation."

"Where are you heading off to, anyway, Jim?"

"Starfleet Headquarters. I have a briefing scheduled with Harry Morrow in forty-five minutes, and I don't want to be late."

"Isn't it lucky, Jim, I just happen to be flying in your direction," Sheer replied with a false smile on his face.

As they both walked onto the tram platform, a female voice came on over the port intercom, the reverberating voice directing the commuters to the next arrival and departure gates for the trams. The incoming tram flight number five-zero-five, which was voiced on the intercom, made Kirk walk two gates up, to a platform with only three people making a small queue. Slowly they walked to the back of the queue.

"Little mistake, we could have ended up in Japan just then," Kirk said to Sheer as they waited in the now correct queue. "This looks like ours coming in now, it's two minutes early," he added with relief. "It will give me a chance to catch up on my paperwork before the briefing starts."

Overhead they could see the flight tram preparing for its landing sequence. When it arrived the doors opened like a eagle's wing, and people began to fill the tram seats one by one; finally Kirk and Sheer entered and then slowly the door came down after them. With a small crowd on the tram they easily found seats near the front, which suited them.

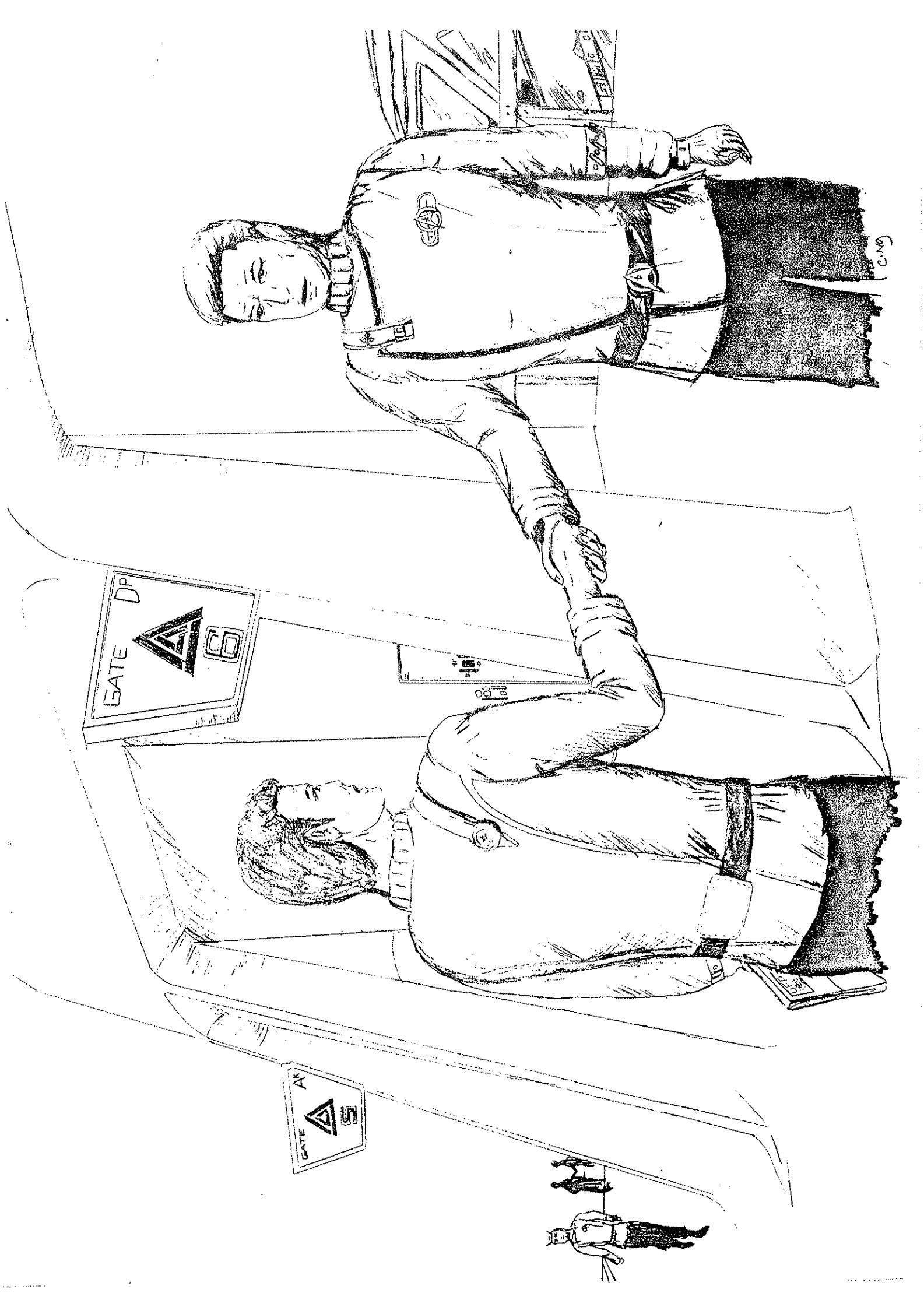
Gradually they could feel the tram's inertia-dampeners coming into action as they slowly moved upwards like a floating metal carpet. As they crossed San Francisco Bay they marvelled at the sights of Old Alcatraz Island, infamous nearly three hundred years previously for being a high security prison, but now redesigned as a children's fun park. They also crossed over other old sights such as Telegraph Hill, which was near their final destination.

Finally the tram arrived at its destination, a couple of minutes earlier than was expected of it. As it came in to land the main thrusters fired to cushion the landing until she touched the ground. Again the doors began to open, revealing a different exterior for the exiting passengers.

"Well, Jim, it looks like we go our separate ways from here," Sheer said loudly as he alighted from the tram with Kirk following close behind. "Oh, and good luck with your meeting, Jim. It's been nice to talk to an old friend again."

"Same here," Kirk answered with a tone of uncertainty to his voice.

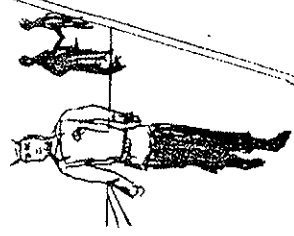
Kirk moved away silently through the crowd of people to the terminal exit, and towards the main Starfleet Headquarters building. Walking over the large



C.M.G.

GATE DP
A5

GATE A5



blue and black global shaped picture, surrounded by a large gold wreath - the emblem of the United Federation of Planets - imprinted into the floor, he remembered it had always been the centre of attraction in the main courtyard on entering the building.

Inside the building Kirk took the first turbolift to the twentieth floor. A few minutes after he entered the lift the doors once again slid open to reveal a different scene of calmness. He stepped out into a large bluey-white coloured reception hall. The walls were neatly decorated on either side with pictures of the Admiralty and members of staff, going back twenty years or so, and on some he saw himself behind a group of officers, receiving their honours. Slowly he walked to the other side of the wall, looking at the vast numbers of ships that were in the naval service. Walking on he stopped at one particular ship; it was the old model Enterprise. Under the picture a small brass plaque showed the words:

"The Pride of Starfleet Command and Those Who Served In Her".

Looking at it brought back fond memories of when he was still on his five-year mission. He turned away with a small smile on his face and walked towards the secretary's desk. Before he even reached the desk, the young lady dressed in the standard Starfleet uniform looked up with a smile on her red-cheeked face.

"Admiral Kirk - oh, sorry, I mean Captain." Her cheeks went rosier with the embarrassment. "You're a bit early, but the Admiral will see you now if you wish."

"There's no need for you to be embarrassed, Sarah - I'm the one who should be."

She then placed her finger on one of the numerous buttons on her desk console. "Ad...I mean, Captain Kirk has arrived, sir," she said with a sweet tone into the console. Suddenly an answer from the small speaker on the desk came on. The voice was rather rough but had a clear sound to it.

"Can you tell him to wait there for five minutes please, Sarah, I've a bit of work to finish off. Thank you," replied the voice from the intercom.

The secretary gave a warm smile at Kirk. "Admiral Morrow is tied up at the moment - could you wait for five minutes, Captain? I'm sure he won't be long if you just take a seat."

"Thank you," Kirk replied, as he walked to the nearest chair which was placed against the opposite wall facing the reception desk. He sat down, comfortably sinking about an inch down in the padded seat, which clearly matched the room decor. "So, how're things, Sarah?" Kirk asked, trying to keep himself occupied to pass the minutes away.

"Much the same. Yet it does feel rather different without you here," she replied softly.

"Don't worry, I'm still a part of Starfleet as much as you." He grinned again, then stared aimlessly at the wall of photographs facing him.

CHAPTER TWO

Lieutenant Saavik silently gazed out of her bedroom window, staring aimlessly at the deep reddish Vulcan sky, which gave her a tanned appearance as the sky's colours reflected off her features.



The only thoughts on her mind at this moment were of peace and tranquillity, which was what this planet felt like. It was a planet like no other she had ever heard of or visited in her years in Starfleet. It was like a fable come true, a haven of endless peace, without emotion to tangle one's desires.

As she continued to stare out of the large, oval window, she could feel the warm, gentle breeze of the Vulcan air brushing against the shadowy features of her smooth, round face, and gently displacing the long, curly, brunette hair behind her as the warm currents quickly forced their way into the room. She wished she could stay here forever but it was not possible for someone who was in her line of work; she was too dedicated a Starfleet officer. Thinking to herself how fortunate she was to be on the planet of her late mother's ancestors, she said to herself in her mind, *Mother, look how far I have travelled to see the world of your father and your father's father. I now know of its true beauty and the peace it holds for all. Why did you ever leave?* Small trickling tears came from the corners of her eyes, which she thought was quite unusual for a person of her upbringing. This sadness was not only for her mother, who she knew was a Vulcan, but also for her Romulan father for whom she felt contempt and anger, for abandoning her mother and herself on the failed Romulan outpost known only to its former residents as 'Hellguard'.

She felt her life as being in a maelstrom of turmoil ever since she came into existence. Up to now close friends of hers had died, all due to the Genesis Project, which many saw as a breakthrough in population distribution. But to the few, it was a weapon of unbelievable destruction on a planetary scale. The young Dr. David Marcus, who was its creator and a very close friend of hers, whom she had come to know and love, was one of those who suffered its consequences. So too was Cadet Peter Preston who had been Saavik's student during the Enterprise's training voyage; and also the reborn Spock. The question that surrounded her was why did her friends always have to die at great cost?

She then gathered her thoughts together, putting her mind back in order as it was before she entered her room. She quickly wiped the tears from her eyes, then straightened her Starfleet uniform, stretching out any creases that she could see. Slowly, she walked to the door which automatically opened into the main corridor, which carried no decor of any kind but was dimly lit, and exited towards the back route from the building, where the Earth woman Amanda Grayson, the wife of Ambassador Sarek, stood. Saavik silently walked towards Amanda who turned around, feeling Saavik's presence near her. Smiling at Saavik, Amanda turned back, looking at the two red suns setting behind the range of mountains in the distance.

"What troubles you, Lt. Saavik?" Amanda spoke lightly, still looking at the red sky in wonder.

"I have just received a transmission from Admiral Morrow of Starfleet Command. It seems I am required to go back to Earth on a mission of high importance." Saavik also looked out towards the horizon and then back to Amanda, whose back was towards her.

"Is Spock also on that mission?" Amanda said with an emotion in her words which even Saavik could sense.

"I believe he is a member of this mission," was Saavik's answer.

"Take care of him for me, and in turn he will take care of you."

It took Saavik a little time to figure out the logic in her words but she finally understood what it meant to both her and Spock. "I must leave within the hour; my shuttle will be leaving orbit soon - and thank you for being so kind to me and showing me the real sense of being a Vulcan." Saavik turned around and walked back to her room as silently as she had come out, leaving Amanda still marvelling at the beauty of the sunset.

Saavik swiftly went to the desk which had a small intercom control. She pressed it and spoke into it. "This is Lt. Saavik. Could you please prepare for beam-out to the shuttle port in four minutes, Saavik out." Saavik quickly gathered together her spare uniform from the chair and walked out towards the transporter station. At about the time she arrived in the transporter room, another Starfleet officer holding the rank of Ensign stood there waiting for her at the entrance. He was a tall, light brown haired man whose face bore some little resemblance to the late Peter Preston, Mr. Scott's nephew who had died bravely in the starship battle between the U.S.S. Enterprise and the Reliant, which was in the hands of the evil tyrant Khan Noonian Singh.

"Well, you're rather early, Lieutenant; where are you off to?" the officer said.

"I have to get back to Earth for an important assignment."

"How unfortunate for you, Lieutenant. I've just been granted leave from my Vulcan assignment here." He spoke with relief, as though he hadn't seen home for a long time since his stay here.

They each stood on one of the six circular transport pads, waiting there for quick transit to the shuttlecraft orbiting the planet. A Vulcan engineer walked out of a small room and into the control pod of the transporter system, and spoke into the intercom to the shuttle.

"This is Vulcan Transport Station Four; two ready for beam-out."

A woman's voice came through the shuttle's communications intercom in reply. "This is U.S.S. Brighton; we copy. You may beam aboard when ready."

The Vulcan transport officer placed his slender hands on the transport console; his left hand rested on two red buttons in sequence, then he placed his right hand on the slider control. Slowly his pale fingers pushed the slider downwards, and a small metal hum sounded on the transporter platform. Saavik and the Ensign could feel a tingling sensation in their bodies as they were quickly bathed in a bright blue and red light which swallowed them whole, until they appeared on the transporter platform of a shuttle bound for Earth.

The minute they appeared on the shuttle, a young junior-grade Lieutenant greeted them, then showed them both to their cabins. Before Saavik and the Ensign went their separate ways to their cabins, they thanked each other for their pleasant chat. Then finally they separated in opposite directions for their journey.

Over three hundred miles above the Earth, in the Spacedock, engineers were very active inside the new Enterprise as she was being heavily serviced. Supervising the work was Cdr. Montgomery Scott who was making sure that everything was meeting his high standards. Even after the new Enterprise was built Scott insisted that some alterations were needed, as he didn't feel safe with some of the new equipment that was installed.

In the engineering section on O Deck, Scott was hard at work trying to balance the matter and anti-matter fuel pods correctly, as he'd noticed a slight fluctuation on the intermix monitor and control consoles just after the ship had gone into warp drive during their first test run.

To Scott the exterior of the ship looked just the same as the old one which had been destroyed by Kirk, but the interior was rather different in many aspects. She had a staggering speed which exceeded that of the old model by far, as she had been fitted with the new transwarp drive system, which was much smaller than that of the Excelsior. It was the new engines that didn't quite

agree with Scott as he always preferred the old FWG-1 engines because he knew them inside out better than any person, other than their designers.

Parts of the bridge consoles had also been changed; many of the computer consoles were designed to monitor the engines for things like stress and overheating, which could easily be controlled from the bridge at a touch of a button. This meant he did not need to be in the engine room all the time, which also upset him as he felt at home down below and being away from his engines always made him feel homesick.

"Commander Scott!" The voice reverberated through the quiet hum of the engine room to Mr. Scott's ears. Scott turned around to see a young engineering officer walking towards him, holding in his hand a small grey tetrahedral shaped object which was only about five inches wide.

"What have you got there, laddie?" Scott exclaimed, looking with curiosity at the object the engineer was holding.

"It's a part of the emergency by-pass computer which you told me to remove."

"Hand it over, lad, let's have a look." Scott took the object from the engineer, and as he took a grip of it his hands sagged a little due to its weight.

"It looks quite light but it's very heavy," the officer said as Scott held it. Holding it very carefully, he examined it closely with his eyes and hands, feeling its smooth edges and the narrow grooves and protrusions on each face.

"This is that newly-designed modulation block which by-passes any invalid information, isn't it?" Scott abruptly questioned the officer.

"Yes, it is. I believe this is the heart of your problem anyway, Commander." The engineer looked carefully at Scott, who he thought was going to quiz him further.

"Ah, here it is," Scott said, after feeling one of the faces again. "It looks like we have a faulty module here; the circuits burned out causing the module to overload. See if ye can find a replacement, lad."

"Aye, sir!" the engineer answered without hesitation, as Scott gave the block back.

Scott then turned back to his unfinished work and continued as though nothing had happened. Suddenly, just as Scott was about to get a feel for his work, another sound, emanating from the small communicator panel just behind him on the monitoring board, interrupted him.

Blip blip, blip blip! The communicator sounded. Scott stood up just as soon as the sound echoed to his ears, cursing it at the same time for interrupting while he was hard at work on the ship's most delicate components.

"They'd better have a damn good reason for callin' me," he said. He quickly thumped the voice-out button on the console. "Mr. Scott here!" he said, with a small tone of anger to his voice.

"Commander Scott, Starfleet Command has requested your presence at main headquarters right away, sir." The officer's voice cut off so that Scott could answer.

"I'll be over just as soon as I can. Over and out." Scott turned back to his work and for a moment he stopped to think. He then turned in the direction of the two officers in the distance who were supposed to be working on the engines - but from his standing position it was clear that they were not. This

gave him a good idea.

"Lts. Ericson and Sykes, over here!" Scott called out to the two engineers who were exchanging words. "Instead of yer useless bickering, see if ye can fix this together. Make sure you reconnect the right lines to the right impulse signals," he added. "We don't want to short out the whole engine, do we?" He looked at the two officers in whose care he was going to leave the ship's engines.

"No, sir," both officers answered.

As Saavik entered her cabin the interior light automatically came on, as it would do when any person entered a cabin. Her room was lit very brightly, almost blinding her as she entered. *The last person who had this room must have preferred a brightly-lit room,* she thought to herself. Swiftly she moved towards the room's environmental console and hastily turned down the light switch to her desired level. The lights turned from a bright, scorching light to a dark and dim one which was more suitable for her eyes. She also pressed another switch which altered the room's rather cool temperature to a level several degrees higher than that which any normal Human being could have tolerated for long.

Slowly she walked around the room, examining it, making sure that it was satisfactory for her needs. She stared around, looking at the standard Starfleet decorations which looked rather bland even for her taste. Before she sat down to rest, she removed her red tunic so she could feel more relaxed, and not tied up in a made-to-fit straightjacket, which was what it felt like to her.

When she'd removed her tunic she placed it on the nearest chair, and sat on the edge of her bed. Taking in some short, silent breaths, she moved to the centre of the bed, and propped her back against the bedside wall. With her legs crossed she closed her eyes and began to meditate in pure silence.

Deep in the heart of central San Francisco, in the Pacific Heights area of the crowded, hilly city where streets are busy as the shoppers roam around the large stores looking for the best bargains to buy, and visitors from afar take in the breathtaking sights of the metropolis, nothing ever changes. Yet still it was a day like any other day, busy as ever, which seemed almost endless.

In one of the large city buildings, sitting lazily poised on a long cushion sofa in his apartment home, was a silent Commander Hikaru Sulu, staring at his video monitor. The only noise that emanated from his living room was from his video player which was transmitting old movies.

Being very bored, he began to change the television channels randomly by voice command. Whatever he ordered, the monitor would immediately comply. "Monitor channel 10!" A war movie suddenly appeared on the screen, as spaceships clashed against each other. Again he turned the channel. "Monitor channel 60 C.B.S.!" Again another movie appeared before his tiring eyes. He then refrained from any further channel changing, and began to watch the film with disappointment. Still he was hoping that any moment now something exciting would happen that would keep him from falling asleep. But it never occurred.

The film he was watching was loosely based on an old twenty-second century love story which Sulu thought was still very boring to watch, but there was nothing else exciting that took his interest on the other channels. As the film progressed Sulu began to feel very tired, his eyelids began to feel their weight. In under five minutes he was fast asleep, with the video monitor still transmitting its film. After the film finished it automatically turned itself off, at the sign of any static lines on the screen, which told the monitor memory

that it was not transmitting any signals.

Ten minutes later Sulu was awakened by the chime of an old antique analogue clock on his wall which chimed one o'clock in the afternoon.

"Damn, I'd better hurry before I miss the meeting," Sulu said as he rubbed the sand from his eyes, so he could see the clock in front of him more clearly. He slowly stood up and gave out a low-pitched yawn, stretching his arms outwards like an old oak tree, and at the same time walked towards the bathroom and closed the door manually.

CHAPTER THREE

As the doors came together behind Kirk, he found himself surrounded by a hierarchy of six officers, in a large, pale blue room with decor similar to that of the reception hall. Each officer was an Admiral, all but one a close friend to Captain Kirk. Just being here made Kirk feel quite at home, amongst some of his closest friends when he used to be a part of the Admiralty.

Admiral Harry Morrow, as he was called by his closest friends, stood up from his desk in the middle of the room, and greeted Kirk by shaking hands. Each officer followed suit in turn; first Admiral Forrestal, Head of Starfleet Intelligence, who gave a slight grin as he shook his hand. Then Admiral Xen, the first Vulcan to become Admiral, shook hands, showing no emotion in his face.

"Rear Admiral John Nixon," Kirk said, shaking his hand. "It's been a while," he added softly.

"It sure has, Jim," Nixon said, returning the greeting.

Rear Admiral Reinhart shook Kirk's hand, giving a false grin which Kirk in turn copied. Then finally Admiral Angela Berry, an officer highly regarded by many people for always getting her work done very efficiently.

"Hi," Kirk said in return for her secretive smile.

"Now that we are all reacquainted, shall we get down to business?" Morrow exclaimed with a sense of importance showing on his dark brown face. "Well, Jim, I see you've had your test-flight on your new ship; what do you think of her?"

"Thanks, Harry, you've given her the appropriate name; she deserves it, and I believe Cdr. Scott is quite proud of her." He turned away from Morrow to look at Admiral Berry.

"Well, Jim, you'll be glad to hear you're straight into active service as from now."

Morrow walked out from behind his desk towards the large bay window just behind his chair, and looked out through the tinted grey glass towards the view of San Francisco Bay, gazing at the various land and air vessels which passed close by. His companions watched his every move towards the window, only to see his back and the darkened image of his face reflected on the window panes. Morrow came straight to the point.

"Jim, we need your type of experience to run this mission. We all agreed that this particular mission needs your skills, as you are familiar with studying the unknown." Morrow quickly turned to one of his Admirals. "Admiral Forrestal, can you show our Captain the distress call we picked up two hours ago?"

At that moment all eyes were fixed on Forrestal as he walked behind Morrow's desk and pressed a couple of switches to play back the audio transmission. He

himself studied the recording more closely than any of the others. Before he played it he briefed Kirk that it had come from the U.S.S. Excelsior just before they'd lost contact with her. Forrestal lightly touched the sensor pad which instantly released the play switch and it began to play. Captain Styles' voice spoke out, giving a brief status report on the ship's condition after the first attack had been made.

Kirk's face began to change as he listened; he felt the fear that sounded in Styles' voice every time he heard a loud bang or a crash in the background. The other Admirals also showed the same expressions on their faces as the transmissions were being played over the desk speaker. Berry closed her eyes, believing it wasn't really happening to someone she knew. The men took it quite calmly on the surface but underneath felt the pain of the officers on the ship. Then the voice on the speaker cut off.

"That's all we know about it, Jim. We know it happened a couple of days back, as it was transmitted on a subspace channel on their strongest signal, which as I said before only arrived two hours ago." Forrestal looked sharply at Kirk who seemed to be in a world of his own, as though the transmission was still playing.

Kirk turned quickly towards Forrestal, and then to Morrow, looking at them eye-to-eye in turn. "The Excelsior was supposed to be your newest and most up-to-date battleship; she had enough power to..."

Xen, the Vulcan Admiral, abruptly stopped the flow of Kirk's illogical words. "How can you destroy something we do not yet fully understand, and may yet hold more unexpected surprises for us? Its capabilities could be far beyond our own comprehension." His words seemed to carry a tone reminiscent of Kirk's friend Captain Spock.

"You're right," Kirk said, knowing that he had spoken before he thought. "I stand corrected," finishing off his apologetic sentence.

Admiral Nixon walked towards Kirk, swiftly manoeuvring himself face-to-face with him. "From our studies we have found that it cannot be either the Romulans or the Klingons because this ship fired at the Excelsior with its cloaking device up." Nixon then turned round towards the others. "We know, from our intelligence and the Klingon Bird of Prey we salvaged from the Bay, if any weapons are to be fired the ship must lower its cloaking device." Again Nixon turned to Kirk, waving his hands about as he talked. "Also, the vessel was travelling at warp nine!"

Reinhart began to speak after Nixon finished. "Maybe the Klingons or the Romulans have found a way to do it." He looked closely at Nixon.

"It's rather like firing a phaser blindfolded; to shoot you must remove the cloth."

They all looked at Reinhart, not saying a word.

"I doubt that even the Romulans or Klingons can, since their shield principles are very similar to ours."

Admiral Morrow then spoke out after Reinhart. "That is why you're here, Jim."

"My crew?" Kirk spoke as though he needed them now, to help him with his suggestions.

"I've assembled your old crew, seeing as you work better with them as a team, but -" Morrow paused for a moment to catch Kirk's full attention - "I've added some new members to your ship." Kirk didn't look at all surprised at

Morrow's plans. "You'll be briefing the main crew in just under twenty-eight hours, and good luck, Jim!" Morrow smiled as a brief sign that he was behind him all the way.

Again the Admirals in turn shook Kirk's hand, each wishing him luck. Lastly, Angela came up to Kirk.

"I hope to see you back here all in one piece." She looked at him and shook his hand lightly, leaving him behind with Morrow as the doors came together behind her. He was still staring at an empty doorway when Morrow called his name.

"Jim, do you remember what I told you before you shanghaied the Enterprise from Spacedock?" Morrow jogged Kirk's memory with what he'd said last time, in the officers' lounge. "If you keep up this emotional behaviour...."

Kirk repeated Morrow's sentence simultaneously like an echo, "You'll destroy yourself; yes, I know, Harry," Kirk replied.

"The point is, Jim, you must concentrate on your mission. Up to now your life is in a bit of chaos." Morrow gave a strong, emotional stare at Kirk and continued, "Also, I've got the Klingons breathing down my neck about the Genesis incident - they've promised to shoot you out of space the minute they catch sight of you in a Starship, so keep a low profile, will you?"

"I promise," Kirk said with a smile.

"I hope I have your word on that, Jim." Morrow then walked to his desk and pressed a small button, ejecting a plastic card which held the recording of the Excelsior incident. He handed it carefully to Kirk. "If you do come out of this with the ship and crew in one piece, you may still have the chance to get promoted to higher rank again - what do you say, Jim?"

Kirk turned away, facing a small table which was covered with scale models of Federation Starships. He walked up to it and scanned them carefully, finally picking out the Constitution Class model which resembled the new Enterprise. He turned round with it and looked at Morrow. "I'll think about it, Harry, but in the meantime I'll stick with one of these," holding up the model to give Morrow the point of his answer. Kirk then placed the model carefully back in its original place amongst the other Starships, and walked back to Morrow's desk.

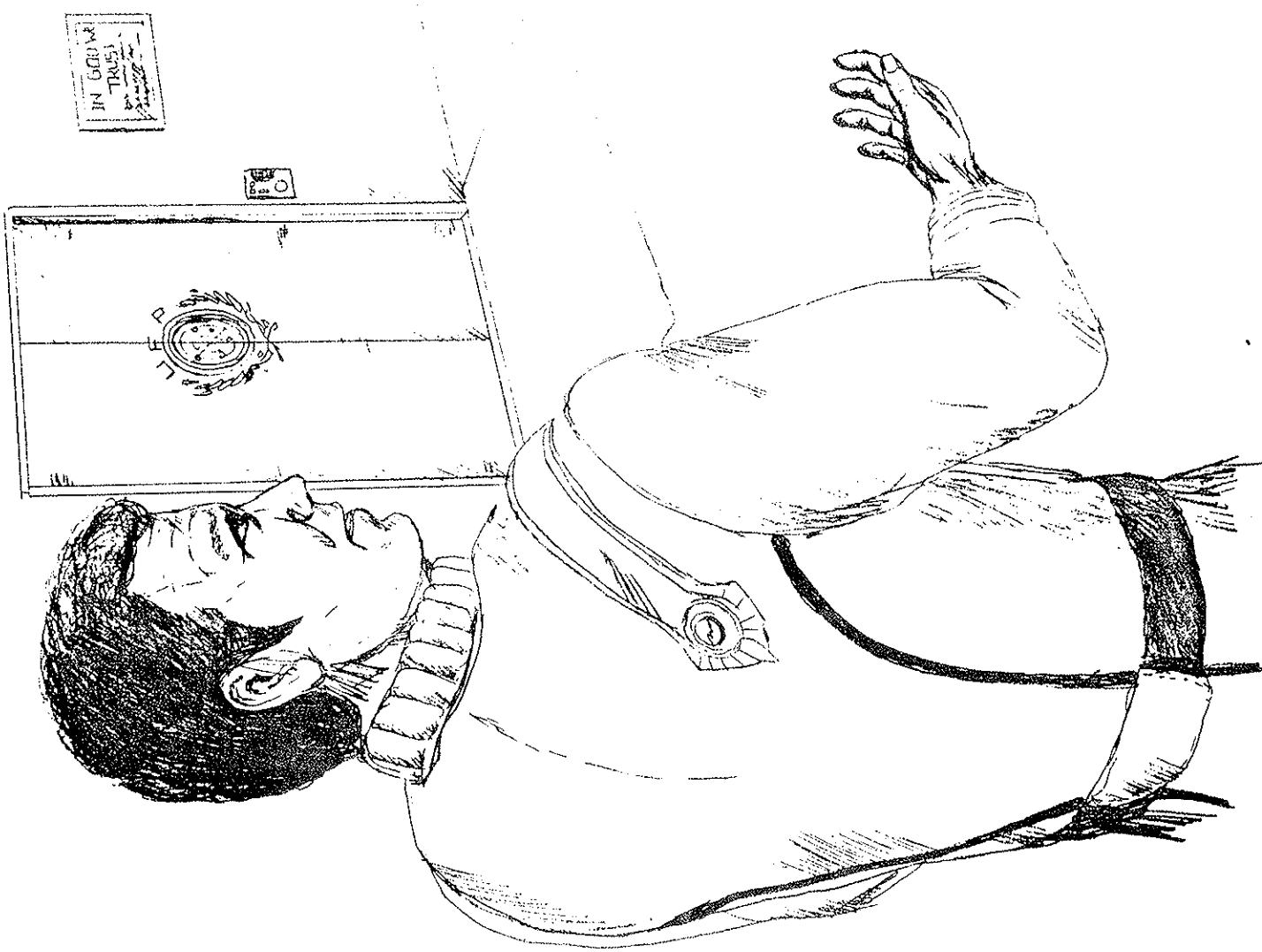
"I understand," Morrow answered, showing very clearly that he didn't want to lose a good officer like Kirk. "There are times when I wish I had a Starship to command again," he continued.

Kirk walked towards the door. When he reached it he turned and faced Morrow. "Well, if you know what's good for you, do what I do."

"No thanks," Morrow replied.

Kirk finally turned back to the door, laughing, and exited, leaving Morrow standing behind his chair.

In one of the many Starfleet conference rooms, which was bare of any type of fanciful decoration, Kirk stood waiting at the end of a large, rectangular table surrounded by twelve empty chairs on each side and one at each end. Kirk was standing in front of one of them. The swishing noise of the doors caught Kirk's attention, as the officers of his ship entered. First in came his old comrades, Commanders Hikaru Sulu, Montgomery Scott, Pavel Chekov and Nyota Uhura. Captain Spock also entered, insisting that he would serve under Kirk, although they were the same rank. Finally Lt. Saavik rushed through, having only arrived from the



shuttle ten minutes previously. She had also just been given her new rank of junior science officer, serving under Spock, which she found most desirable. Also some new officers entered the room, giving Kirk a chance to glance at them as they entered one by one. The doors finally closed after all ten officers had entered.

"Has anyone seen Dr. McCoy?" Looking at each officer in turn to see if they knew anything of his whereabouts, Kirk finally gave up after five minutes of waiting for him, and started the conference.

After an hour of continuous discussion over the Excelsior distress signal, and acquainting themselves with the three new officers who had been specifically chosen for this mission by Morrow, Kirk made a final announcement to the officers.

"Now, gentlemen - and lady," looking at Uhura, "I know you are all ready to get on the way but remember the Excelsior was a much larger and more powerful ship than this lady." Kirk looked at Scott, hoping he didn't offend him. "And remember how easily she was overcome, so let's keep our wits about us." Then Scott broke in.

"Remember, Captain, that bucket of bolts they call the Excelsior was never right from the start; nuts and bolts came apart in my hands." The rest of the crew gave a small chuckle at Scott's remark, remembering the sabotage he had performed on her to allow the Enterprise to escape her pursuit.

"I'll remember that, Scotty," Kirk replied. "Our departure will be at zero seven hundred hours. Be prepared, gentlemen."

"Captain," Scott called out, catching the others' attention. "I've had to rechannel the engines back to the phasers."

"Why is that?" Kirk questioned curiously.

"It's these new transwarp engines. When I tried to disconnect the phaser power unit from the warp drive units as you requested, they just automatically cut off, burning out one of the memory modules in the process." Scotty gave an apologetic look at Kirk, and then stared down at the table, thinking that he hadn't tried hard enough.

"Well, it looks like we're stuck with this new design," Kirk said drily.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Scott said.

"It's all right, there was nothing you could have done." Kirk's words made Scott feel less sorry for himself. "If that's all, gentlemen, this meeting is terminated." The officers stood up, then slowly made their way to the exit, leaving Kirk and Spock seated.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dr. McCoy headed towards the conference room corridor, walking at a fast pace. Although he knew he was late, he still believed Jim Kirk would wait behind for him. As he reached the corner which turned into the conference room corridor, he saw Sulu and Scott talking to each other as they walked in his direction.

"Dr. McCoy, you're a bit late for the meeting - what happened?" Scott said loudly.

"I was giving a lecture in a college hospital," was McCoy's excuse. Quickly

he walked past the other exiting officers and entered the room. Kirk and Spock were standing by the table when they saw McCoy walk in, out of breath.

"Why, Bones, the party's over." Kirk smiled in relief just to see that McCoy was all right. McCoy walked up to the closest chair he could find and slowly eased himself into its moulded shape and then slouched, showing he was relaxed.

"As I told Scotty, I was held up at a college lecture. You know, it's embarrassing when nobody bothers to listen to you. There are times when I wish I could torture them all like the Spanish Inquisition. That would make them learn!" Slowly McCoy stood up and faced Kirk and Spock. "Well, Jim," he said, "what's going on?"

Kirk turned to the table, picking up his notes. "I'll tell you later, Bones; first I have to see an Admiral for the last time."

"Before you go, who's in charge? You, or Mr. Spock?"

Spock looked at McCoy eye-to-eye and spoke monotonously. "If you are referring to the control of this mission and the Enterprise, Doctor, it will no doubt be Captain Kirk." Relief came quickly to McCoy's red face after Spock mentioned Kirk's name. Spock went on to back his logical statement. "As many officers, including yourself, Doctor, will know, it is difficult to obey two commanders at once when they have different opinions."

"I do not need one of your damn logical lectures, Spock. All I wanted to know is who is in command, and since you told me, I'm relieved it's not you, for a start." The tone of McCoy's voice sharpened as he spoke to Spock, which revealed he was trying to attempt another of his 'illogical arguments' as Spock always expressed it. McCoy continued, "And another thing...."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Kirk broke into their erupting argument, trying to prevent it from continuing any further. "This is not the place or the time; shall we call a truce?" He looked at McCoy. "Till later, that is?" Kirk gave his usual grin to brighten up the atmosphere. McCoy looked at Kirk, then Spock, then back to Kirk, smiling.

"Anyway, with this new crew, it looks like we're going to have to throw our weight around a little, so Bones, keep it for them, not for us!" Kirk exclaimed to Dr. McCoy.

"Well, Jim, when do we leave?"

"Two hours," was Kirk's instant reply.

"It doesn't even give me time to get my bearings," McCoy answered in protest.

"You'll get there in the end, Bones," Kirk replied happily.

"Jim!" Spock said, "I'll be reporting to the Enterprise now."

"Right, Spock. Meanwhile I've got to get my final orders from Admiral Morrow. Excuse me, gentlemen." Kirk quickly walked out of the room, as did Spock, but at a slower pace, followed by Dr. McCoy.

At the end of the corridor Kirk saw Dr. Peterson walking towards the reception desk before leaving the building.

"Dr. Peterson!" Kirk called. "Are you en route to the Enterprise?"

"Yes, I am, I haven't finished installing the new sensor device yet. Why?"

"I want it operational before we reach our destination, or else it will never serve its purpose." Kirk stared at Peterson; he never liked civilians on board his ship, as he always found them a burden.

"You've got to give me more time, Captain. This equipment is still only experimental on your ship. It was supposed to be fitted to the Excelsior but we never had the chance to install it."

Kirk gave him another stern look. "I've just had a brief chat with Admiral Morrow; he tells me that if we find the Excelsior intact, you are to report to her and help repair any damages, since you helped design her sensors - which didn't help much in the attack anyway."

With Kirk criticising his achievements, Peterson didn't look happy at all, when Kirk knew that it wasn't really 'his' sensors that let the crew of the Excelsior down. He only used it as an example to keep a distance between himself and Peterson and his technical assistant Roger Ruty. Kirk had never liked people messing around with his ship since his encounter with Dr. Daystrom and his prototype computer the 'M5', years ago, which almost cost him his life, his career and his ship, when it was almost destroyed by other Federation Starships in a war game.

Kirk then turned away and walked off in the direction of the main orbital transporter system located on the other side of the Starfleet building. On reaching the transporter room he immediately stood on the transporter platform and looked at the officer on the console. "To the Spacedock, please." The transporter officer fed the coordinates into the console and pressed his fingers over the slide controls, ready for Kirk's command.

"Energize!" Slowly the humming sound of the transporter filled the room, and just as slowly, Kirk's body began to fade as he was swallowed by the energy beam and deposited in the Space Dock. Walking off the Space Dock transporter, he headed for the officers' lounge to meet his fellow crew before they all embarked on their new mission.

In a small portion of the Spacedock the corridors were almost silent but for the sounds of pacing feet and the chatter of two female junior officers who were heading in the direction of the officers' lounge. As they reached their destination the large doors opened for the two young officers. With the doors open, the corridor's silence was smothered by the echoing sounds of people's voices; the doors closed behind the two and the corridors were again as silent as before.

In the officers' lounge there was a great cacophony of sounds of people's voices, mixed in with a little soft music in the background. The atmosphere itself was thick and rather hazy, with the bright lights and the sour stench of smoke coming from the few people who still smoked cigars.

In the far corner by the large viewing windows overlooking the docking bay there was a small crowd of veteran officers socialising amongst themselves, as they were about to leave on a new mission.

"Well, my friends, here's to old times!" Kirk, McCoy and the four other commanding officers ceremoniously joined their drinking glasses together with a light tinkle. McCoy then spoke to the whole room.

"A toast to commemorate all those who in the 'Genesis Affair' gave their lives so that millions of others would live, and to the courage and determination of those who join us now in this celebration!"

The many people in the lounge, even the barman, picked up a glass, raising them in a kind of.

"Good speech, Doctor," Kirk said. "Maybe you should help me do that at staff meetings."

"Well, I just thought it would be a good idea to bring out an emotional burst from time to time." McCoy then took a sip from his half-full glass of Romulan ale and continued to speak. "Lucky Spock isn't here to comment on what I just said; that would be all I need now."

Kirk then walked with McCoy to the large bay windows which overlooked the docking bay where all the starships were moored. He could not see his ship as it was far from view on the other side of the bay. He could only see the U.S.S. Saratoga with its power lights off and moored in the vast expanse of the bay with only the small travel pods and 'work-bee' construction sleds darting from one side of the port to the other to keep it company.

"Still thinking about this mission, Jim?" McCoy also stared out of the window as he tried to make conversation.

"I keep thinking of the old days - am I as good now as I used to be? Up to now I've destroyed the Enterprise, disobeyed a direct command which led to where I am now. I'm a marked man by the Klingons, which led to David being killed, and still I know very little about my son." Kirk pondered on his last words, then turned to McCoy. "Have I lost that touch of command?"

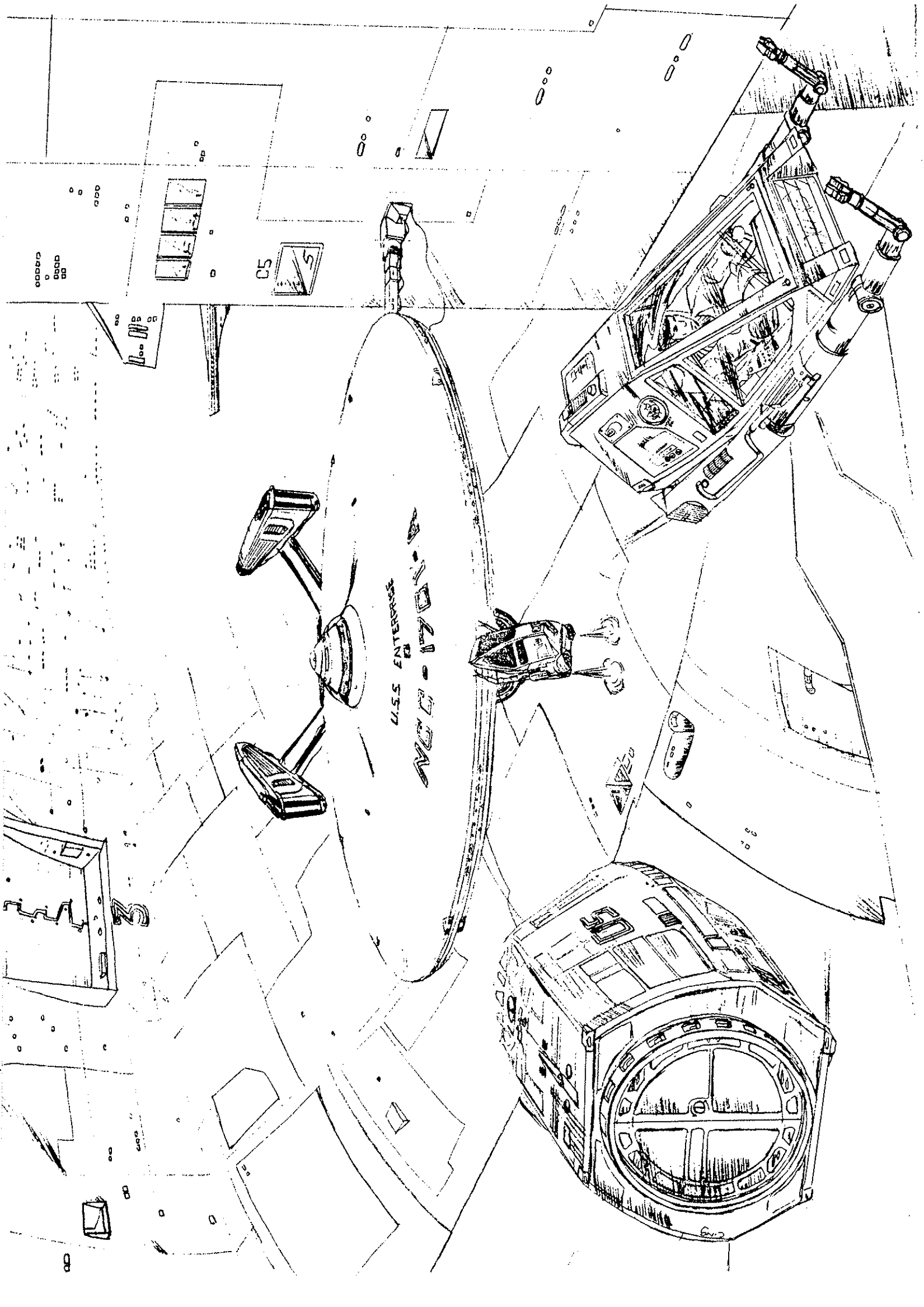
"We all make mistakes from time to time," McCoy said. "Even I sometimes feel guilty, that I really could have tried harder, when my patients die on the operating table." McCoy then looked back through the window as he did not want to see the changing emotional expressions on Kirk's face. "Jim, listen to me - your biggest mistakes had to surface at one time or another - it's not like it used to be, you know. Every decision you made had to be correct, hundreds of lives depending on your words alone. Jim, you're the best there is, no-one can take that away from you. You did what any loyal Starfleet officer would have done."

"Well, I'll just have to live with it, and, you know, I haven't even seen Carol about David yet." Kirk's voice quickly changed its tone and he added a bit of sarcasm to liven both of them up. "Knowing Carol, she'll probably have me shot on sight." Kirk then changed the subject, as it was getting rather too emotional and personal. "Come on, Bones, let's get back to the others." He added slight pressure to McCoy's back and urged him back to the crowd.

A small travel pod detached itself from one of the main docking ports of the Space Dock. Inside travel pod number five its passengers were still in high spirits and were all raring to get on with this mission. Kirk once again stood in front of his comrades, looking out from the pod's main viewport at the vastness of the dock, and the number of small registered spacecraft floating motionless at their moorings.

Scott, who stood next to Kirk, guided the pod in the direction of the new Enterprise which was moored just behind the U.S.S. Saratoga. Scott slowly eased the pod around the Saratoga and, as he did, the smooth lines of the Enterprise's saucer began to appear. The way Scott manoeuvred the pod to give an overall view made Kirk feel proud of what he had to command. *With a ship like the Enterprise*, Kirk thought to himself, *I have power and the whole galaxy at my fingertips.* She was one of the best ships in the fleet, and her name expressed it through three hundred years of service.

"Is there any ship as beautiful or as proud as the Enterprise?" Kirk said



out loud to himself as he gazed at the ship.

"She's one of a kind," Scott said, thinking Kirk's question was directed at him.

As the pod neared its destination, Scott requested docking permission at the Enterprise's port-side bay.

The response from the Enterprise was sudden. A sharp female voice spoke out in response to Mr. Scott's request. "You are cleared to dock, port-side bay."

"Thank you," Scott replied abruptly.

Quickly Scott pressed a few buttons on the pod console. In reaction to the information fed into the computer, the pod stopped just fifteen metres away from the airlock, then slowly turned at a ninety degree angle. Precisely matching the position of the rear door to the airlock, Scott then reversed the pod very slowly so as not to damage both vessels on contact.

"Pod secure!" the computer answered as the travel pod connected its docking clamps to the Enterprise.

"As always, Scotty, thank you."

"Aye, sir, the pleasure's all mine," Scott said in response to Kirk's gratitude.

Suddenly the doors slid open.

"Permission to come aboard," Kirk asked one of the two guards by the airlock entrance.

"Permission granted," was the guard's reply. "Welcome back aboard, Ad...Captain Kirk."

A slight giggle could be heard behind Kirk, coming from both Uhura and Chekov in reaction to the guard's mistake over Kirk's old rank. As soon as Kirk and his senior officers entered the ship, they left for their command posts.

Kirk made his way to his cabin on E deck. As he entered his room he headed directly for the personal communication station which was situated next to the dining booth in the far corner of his cabin.

"Captain Kirk to bridge," Kirk said.

"Bridge here, sir," was the answer from the relief officer on the bridge communications console.

"Lieutenant..." Kirk paused a moment, hoping to get the officer's name.

"Dyna, sir, Lt. Dyna," replied the officer, hoping that his soon-to-be task would be a simple one.

"Well, Lt. Dyna, could you find Mr. Spock, wherever he is, and tell him to meet me in my quarters as soon as possible. Kirk out."

Kirk then walked to his bedside and slowly eased himself into position on the bed, with his hands behind his head on the pillow, and legs fully stretched and crossed, looking at the ceiling, thinking about his mission. With the bright light on the bookshelf next to him making him feel slightly tired, his mind slowly drifted away into his subconscious world of fantasies.

His dreams were filled with his past, thoughts of the heroism of his old

crew, memories of sadness at the deaths of his closest friends and relatives that had left a mark in his life. Faces of innocence appeared in his clouded mind, his brother George Kirk, Thomas Leighton, Matthew and Willard Decker, David Marcus and Spock. Kirk knew that even though he had cheated death many times, his was sure to come sooner or later. Maybe this mission was to be his last journey, where no man has travelled before, before his face joined many faces of innocence.

Suddenly there was a light tapping sound on Kirk's door, enough to wake the Captain, who was a very light sleeper.

"Come in, Spock," Kirk called out.

The stoic Spock entered, quietly as always, with hands behind his back. Kirk immediately stood up, straightening his tunic in the process, and faced Spock.

"Spock, how's the ship progressing?"

"It is continuing quite well," replied Spock. "All systems are functioning and operating normally."

"Weapons systems, Spock?"

"Mr. Scott is still working on them. I believe he should be finished rechannelling the phasers."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk replied, then remembered something else. "Oh, and by the way, see to Dr. Peterson who should still be installing the new sensor device."

"Yes, Captain, will that be all?" Spock answered without any emotion showing on his Vulcan face.

"Yes."

Spock swiftly walked towards the exit, and Kirk's eyes followed his every move, thinking how much of the old Spock was still there. Then the doors closed as he left.

"Dr. Peterson, is your system installed?"

"It's finished, but with a few minor hitches. It should be all right," Peterson replied to Spock's question.

"What hitches?" Spock asked curiously.

"Most of our units on the Excelsior are more advanced than those on this ship, so we're finding a little difficulty fitting some parts."

"Very well, Doctor, do what you can." Spock turned away and headed for the nearest turbolift.

CHAPTER FIVE

Captain's Log: stardate 8934.5

The Enterprise is now in final preparation to leave Spacedock on her first major mission. The crew is ready and waiting with excitement to

be on our way to our rendezvous with our unseen nemesis. All is well, yet I can't help wondering what impregnable force lies in our midst. Still I am having second thoughts about this mission, but I hope it will not be reminiscent of our past voyage which has taken so much of me, and has left a deep scar in my life.

The turbolift doors parted with a hiss as Captain Kirk entered the new Enterprise bridge. He was surrounded by new instrumentation, and some new officers on the bridge. He would need to remember their faces, as this could be one long, unforgettable journey into a phenomenal experience.

Lt-Cdr. Sulu turned his head as soon as he heard the swish of the bridge doors opening and closing. A bright smile came to his Oriental face when he glanced in the direction of the door and saw Kirk standing there once again in full uniform. His presence on the ship gave Sulu and the rest of the crew a sense of reassurance that they would return, hopefully in one piece.

"Captain on the bridge!" Sulu announced, to draw the others' attention to Kirk's appearance.

"As you were!" Kirk said, and the crew turned back to their stations, with a noticeable mark of happiness on their faces, all except Science Officer Spock, and junior officer Saavik, who just took Kirk's position for granted. But deep in Spock's Human half, he felt pride in serving under Starfleet's most renowned officer.

Kirk slowly walked anti-clockwise around the outer platform, examining each station carefully. He came to a halt at the science station and looked down at the seated Lt. Saavik, then at Spock who stood behind her, watching her moves on the science station console.

"Are things proceeding as planned, Spock?" Kirk said, hesitating a bit so as not to spoil Saavik's concentration.

"All systems are ready, Captain, and the new sensor you spoke of has been correctly installed, as per your instructions."

"Glad to hear it, Spock." Kirk walked around the handrail and down to the centre platform where the command chair was positioned.

He softly brushed his hands along the seat restraints of the chair, feeling he missed the cold touch of the metal sides.

But no, he thought. It will never be the same as the old Enterprise. It might have the same name and same design as the original, but it will never have the same feel. Kirk refrained from sitting in the chair until he felt he was ready, which was not long as the scheduled departure time was only half an hour away.

Sitting in the centre seat, Kirk began to tap his fingers along the armrest console, waiting for the all clear signal from Spacedock Control.

Uhura then faced Kirk, eager to give the message from the dock. "Captain, Dock Control has cleared us for departure." She turned back to her console.

Kirk's finger ceased its tapping, and he faced the navigator's station. "Navigator, clear all systems!"

"All systems are clear," replied the young officer in the navigator's chair, as he checked to verify his answer on his master control console.

"Thank you," Kirk replied politely to the new officer. "Clear all moorings," he ordered.

The navigator pressed the gravitational support switch that held the Enterprise in the dock. Slowly the cables floated away from the ship like snakes retreating from attacking enemies.

"Aye, sir," the navigator responded. "All moorings have now been cleared."

"Uhura, signal Command to open the space doors," Kirk ordered.

"Aye, sir," Uhura answered as she immediately transmitted Kirk's order.

The gargantuan doors of the Spacedock, that protected the starships from any outside attack, slowly began to open a metre every half-second.

"Helm," Kirk said. "Manoeuvring thrusters."

"Aye, sir," Sulu answered as the ship's engines slowly began to power up.

"Hold station," Kirk said.

"Thrusters at station keeping," Sulu answered as he held the large throttle in front of him, motionless.

Saavik then spoke out. "All systems are functioning normally." She continued to keep a close eye on the many monitors around her in the process, making sure that no malfunctions occurred during the launch.

Suddenly all the exterior lights on the ship's outer hull began to illuminate the large bold writing in all its splendour, showing the words U.S.S. ENTERPRISE NCC 1701-A as the ship would never be seen in interstellar flight. She was now ready to depart.

"Ahead one quarter impulse power."

"Aye, sir, one quarter impulse power," Sulu repeated Kirk's order, making sure he heard correctly.

The huge ship's momentum gradually moved it forward towards the space doors like an arthritic dinosaur. The large space doors, now fully opened, revealed the blackness of space. From inside the Spacedock, it looked like a huge monitor screen with the stars resembling flakes of static which remained motionless, as the Enterprise slowly converged into it. Moving painfully slowly, so as not to damage her new hull on the giant doors, the Enterprise gradually made her way into open space. She was free once again to take on the galaxy as never before, with Captain James T. Kirk and his intrepid, loyal crew.

"We have cleared space doors," Sulu said as he was waiting for his next order.

From space the Enterprise was only a small speck compared to the Spacedock it exited, and the Spacedock itself looked almost invisible compared to the Earth it orbited.

"We are clear and free to navigate," Sulu said.

"Course heading, Captain?" the navigator said, with his hands ready on the preprogrammed computer console, ready to punch in any data Captain Kirk gave.

"One three five mark four," Kirk answered. The navigator then fed the co-ordinates into the computer. "Our heading is towards the edge of the Federation's sphere of influence, where the Excelsior was last reported," he

continued, finishing his answer to the navigator's question. "Mr. Sulu! Engage warp drive, and accelerate to warp five."

"Aye, sir," Sulu answered with a smile, as he indulged himself on the ship's power drive. Sulu's hand gradually pushed the accelerating throttle a centimetre every second, and during those seconds the ship began to build up its power from impulse to sublight speed. The ship itself increased in momentum.

"Warp point five, point seven, point eight," Sulu said as he kept his eyes fixed to the readings on his helm.

The noise in the engine room increased gradually as the flowing colours of radiation in the horizontal and vertical intermix chambers of the warp drive began to swirl faster and faster with every second.

"Warp point nine," Sulu continued counting.

Suddenly the Enterprise, as though it was catapulted from a standing position, zoomed off into infinity. As it moved at super speed, it began to create a doppler-like effect with the stars, and also with ship's exterior viewport lights which symmetrically outlined the ship. Just like a straight rainbow, the Enterprise left a blurring outline of red and blue lights which was the ship's afterimage, surrounded by spiralling tracer lines of stars before it disappeared with a bright flash of light, resembling a star going nova, as it hit the light warp barrier. Then the afterimage of the Enterprise disappeared, tracing the lines of its source into infinity.

From the Enterprise bridge viewer looking outwards, the acceleration from sublight to warp speed resembled a colourful umbrella of fantastic light opening out like the tail feathers of a peacock during its courtship. The officers on the bridge saw themselves being pulled into its epicentre at super lightspeed.

"Warp one," Sulu said.

Kirk stood up and walked towards Spock who was still standing behind Saavik at the science station. "If anything unusual arises, Mr. Spock, report it immediately," he said.

"Understood, Captain," Spock answered.

"Meanwhile, I'll be in sickbay talking to Dr. McCoy," Kirk said, giving Spock the impression that he could do something else worthwhile, other than looking after his favourite, daughter-like student.

"Are you ill, Captain?" Spock asked curiously.

"Not at all," Kirk said with a smile. He then entered the turbolift, turning around facing the door to speak into the computer intercom without any emotion in his words. "G deck!"

CHAPTER SIX

Walking down the narrow, curving corridors towards sickbay, Kirk thought to himself, *Would I destroy this ship again, if I faced the same circumstances as before? How could I? The old Enterprise was the only ship I have ever commanded in my twenty three years of service, and it was the only ship I have ever lost in a battle. Yet now I feel as though I have been reborn, because the Enterprise has always been a part of me; it could never survive without me or I without it. Having this new ship, which is its identical twin, I feel like a phoenix reborn from the flame it perished in. I feel young again.*

The sickbay doors slid open to reveal a highly complex piece of machinery directly in front of Kirk as he entered McCoy's office. McCoy wasn't at all surprised to see him.

"Well, Jim, what brings you here?" McCoy said, as he continued to finish off his medical log.

"What the hell is this contraption?" Kirk said, pointing to the small, grey, cylindrical object which he'd seen the minute he'd entered the room.

The tone in McCoy's voice changed to a more professional note. "It's a new cardiac pump, and I haven't a clue how the damn thing works," he said, cursing it.

"Well, I'm sure you'll think of something, Bones," Kirk said.

"Anyway, Jim, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing," Kirk replied. "Just came to talk, that's all." He stared at a lone empty glass on Bones' bare office table. "Got any brandy in your magic cabinet?" Kirk said, picking up the glass.

"As a matter of fact, I do. I'll share one with you." McCoy stood up and turned to the back of his desk. He opened the sliding door of his medicine cabinet, pulling out a short, stout bottle which contained a musty brown coloured liquid. Removing the glass stopper, he pulled out another glass similar to the one on the table. McCoy began to pour the brandy slowly into the glasses, in two small equal amounts.

"Here's to us," McCoy said with a smile as he raised his glass to Kirk, and took a quick sip of its rapid taste.

"Bones, tell me, do you think I can pull this mission off?" Kirk's voice began to sound more serious as he stared at McCoy.

"Jim, you know as well as I do that I cannot figure everything out for you." McCoy looked at Kirk in the same manner. "What you do next is entirely your decision and nobody else's. Don't blame yourself if you make a bad error in judgement; we all do it all the time. Even Spock can make the odd mistake."

Kirk grinned at McCoy's last sentence, and took another sip of the brandy to stiffen his emotions.

McCoy continued, "You're scared that what you might do next will affect you for the rest of your life." His words rang uncomfortably true, which made Kirk feel unable to fight McCoy's answer.

"Thanks anyway, Bones, for your opinion. Did you read the data on our current mission?" He looked at McCoy, who was in the middle of drinking the remaining brandy in his glass.

"As a matter of fact, I did," McCoy replied solemnly.

"Your opinion, Bones?" Kirk asked abruptly.

"Your guess is as good as mine." McCoy then thought of the first thing that came to mind. "Klingons! Could be a new Klingon device."

"We've thought that out carefully and ruled it out on technical grounds." Kirk's mind began to rush back to his past missions for a similar incident. One thought did come into his mind. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "Do you remember the Cheron race?"

"Of course, but didn't the two factions wipe each other out, leaving Bele and Lokai, who I believe killed each other after leaving the ship?" McCoy looked at Kirk with a faint sign of curiosity, thinking that he had found a connection with this mission.

"We don't really know if they are dead. One could still be alive, and their ship - fast, streamlined and conveniently invisible - could be our clue," Kirk said. "Until then we must wait and see."

Suddenly the intercom on McCoy's office table gave out a high-pitched bleep. Kirk's instinct instantly knew it was for him from Spock, who was to report if anything had arisen. Before McCoy could open the intercom channel, Kirk blocked his hand from touching the switch.

"I'll take it, Bones. It must be Spock; I told him to call," Kirk said in response to his own action. McCoy complied and removed his hand from its poised position.

"Yes, Spock, what is it?" Kirk said abruptly.

"Captain, we have now entered the Federation's unexplored area where the Excelsior was last reported," Spock replied coolly.

"Very well, Spock, keep me advised. Kirk out," Kirk replied.

"Well, Jim, it looks like we may soon find out who our 'pēeping tom' is," McCoy added.

"Let's go find out then, shall we?" Kirk said. He stood up and swallowed the rest of the brandy in one gulp, before replacing the glass on the table and walking out hurriedly, followed by McCoy, to the bridge.

"If it is one of the Chérons, what are they doing in this sector of space?" McCoy said, walking along the corridor with Kirk.

Kirk stopped instantly and turned to McCoy.

"Good point, Bones," he replied, wondering why he had not thought of that idea first. He then continued on to the closest turboshaft with McCoy in fast pursuit. As they waited at the lift door for the turbolift to arrive, Kirk stared at the seam in the middle of the door, waiting for it to open.

The second Kirk turned his head towards McCoy, the door opened unexpectedly, revealing two officers. One was a female yeoman, the other a junior engineer.

"Excuse us, sir," said the engineer, who was standing directly in front of the two senior officers.

"Oh, sorry!" apologised Kirk, who was blocking his exit from the lift. He moved to the side to let them vacate the lift.

"Thank you, Captain," replied the engineer. Kirk smiled back.

"Captain," acknowledged the yeoman as she walked past, smiling.

Kirk and McCoy then entered the turbolift and turned, facing the doors which automatically closed two seconds after their entry. Kirk pressed a small, square button near the communication console, and spoke abruptly. "Bridge." Almost without sensation, they zoomed off to their destination.

"They seem to get younger and younger," McCoy said.

"They want to live fast, even when they're in their teens. Their minds are already set for adventure," Kirk added.

"Well, I'd hate to put a white sheet over their faces on this or any other mission," McCoy said, hoping that his words would not be prophetic.

Again the turbolift was silent, with no exchanged words from either McCoy or Kirk, who had nothing else to say.

Suddenly the lift stopped and the doors opened, revealing an altogether different scene and an atmosphere of tension and excitement amongst the crew. The bridge was the place where action always occurred first. Computers were constantly busy, as were the people.

Kirk and McCoy left the turbolift. McCoy stayed close by the handrail just in case of an emergency, while Kirk took his place in the centre seat when Spock stood to allow his Captain to take his rightful place in command.

"Status report, Spock," Kirk immediately ordered.

"We have just entered the unexplored Federation territory, travelling at warp five, and detected nothing so far," Spock replied.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock," Kirk said as he was handed the ship's log by a female officer, who required his signature for the records department. He signed his name below the report he had made earlier and returned it to the officer who was to record it.

Kirk turned to the helm station. "Mr. Sulu, disengage from warp speed."

"Aye, sir," Sulu answered as he slowly reduced the thruster control from warp five to point eight.

The Enterprise, which was travelling far faster than light itself, suddenly lurched into sublight speed. The image of the Enterprise coming out of warp drive was like a butterfly escaping from its cocoon, as the spiralling parallel line images of the starfield and the ship's own light suddenly caught up with their source. It would have been a beautiful sight worth remembering if any person could have seen the Enterprise in the process of coming out of the warp envelope. She was now travelling through normal time and space; the sleek shape of the Enterprise, only seen with her own light, moved silently through the icy vacuum of space alone.

"We are secured from warp speed, now travelling at warp point eight," Sulu reported.

"Mr. Sulu, reduce to one half impulse power," ordered Kirk.

"Aye, sir."

On the large viewscreen in front of them the stars began to move more slowly as the ship sailed forward on impulse power. Kirk then turned to Spock, who was checking through the library computer for any occurrence similar to the Excelsior's in this sector of space.

Half an hour later Kirk was still sitting in his chair, staring at the screen, waiting for something to happen. "Anything, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Nothing, Captain. The only records we have are of minor confrontations with both the Klingons and Romulans, but there have been no accounts of any unusual disturbances related in this area to serve as explanation."

"Captain." The voice came from the young Romulan-Vulcan woman who was

observing the science station scanner. "I'm picking up a small object on our visual scanners; it's off the starboard side at three two five mark two."

"Saavik, any life forms?" Kirk asked.

"Unable to detect any; there must be a power source blocking it from our internal scanners." She was still looking through her scanners.

"Spock!" Kirk said with a startled sound in his voice.

Spock immediately replied, looking over Saavik's shoulder. "I believe there is a planet near that course, but I cannot determine where."

"How can you tell, Spock?" Kirk questioned.

"For any ship to stay in this sector for a long period, it must have a base to support it."

"All stations yellow alert!" Kirk ordered.

Suddenly the bridge was relieved of five of its non-essential personnel who left through the port side turbolift.

"Navigator, plot course three two five mark two."

"Aye, sir," Lt. Ebel said.

"Mr. Sulu, hard about on the new course setting."

"Aye, sir, course change locked in," Sulu said to Kirk's order.

"Spock, try our new scanners," Kirk said. These not only had a greater range than the original ones, but were designed to cover a wider radius.

"Those reports from Lt. Saavik were from our new scanners," Spock said.

Kirk nodded. "Very good, Mr. Spock."

Slowly the Enterprise moved cautiously in the direction of the mysterious object. After ten minutes of tension amongst the bridge crew as they watched the object appear slowly on the large screen, Kirk called out to Sulu, who was moving the ship ahead cautiously, "Full stop!"

"Aye, sir, full stop," Sulu replied. The ship's momentum gradually took them to a standstill barely two miles from the object. "Now dead stop, sir, at just over two point six five kilometres distance."

"Very good, Mr. Sulu," Kirk said. He rested his chin on the palm of his hand. "Magnification six on viewer."

Sulu quickly turned the small, black knob on his panel, which increased the size of the picture in five separate bursts.

"It's the Excelsior," Sulu said, staring at the ship, which filled half the screen.

"She was attacked! General quarters!" Kirk exclaimed.

"Deflector shields are fully operational," said the young female officer, who had seemed to be very quiet at her weapons station until now. All the monitors on her station sprang into life in full colour the second after she

pressed the shield systems. Two armed guards appeared on each side of the turbolifts, which was standard procedure in this situation.

"Opinion, Spock?" asked Kirk, staring at Spock's back as he was facing the scanners.

"Captain, our scanners cannot penetrate her hull," Spock said, as he turned to answer him.

"Location of power source," Kirk said.

"There seems to be a large vessel hidden behind the Excelsior, according to these sensors," Saavik said, looking back at Kirk. Her looks reflected the image of her mentor, Spock, every time she faced Kirk. McCoy had once told Kirk that Saavik was actually the closest thing Spock had to a daughter. She had been rescued by Spock from death when she was still a child. Spock had made a vow to Saavik's dying mother to foster her. He had brought Saavik up on both Vulcan and Earth, and had even sponsored her training for the Starfleet Academy.

"Lieutenant, can you pinpoint that vessel?"

"Two point eight three kilometres ahead; the Excelsior is the only obstacle that separates us," Saavik said softly, yet unemotionally.

"Have they scanned us yet, Spock?" wondered Kirk.

"Not yet, I believe they are still occupied with the Excelsior." Spock looked at Kirk, then back to his station.

McCoy then walked down to the centre platform where Kirk was seated.

"Well, there goes your theory on the Chérons, Jim," McCoy murmured in Kirk's ear.

"It was a good guess, Bones," Kirk said, still staring at the screen, then at McCoy. "Helm, take us in slow, keeping us parallel to the Excelsior and the other ship. That way we'll be shielded by the Excelsior just in case anything happens."

"Aye, Captain," Sulu said.

"Captain, it's moving away from behind the Excelsior," Spock immediately reported. "It is now taking a direct path towards us, travelling at warp point two."

Kirk's heart began to beat faster; so did many of the bridge crew's, as this would be the first action they had seen in a long time. Kirk began to take things more calmly now as he uttered his next all-important order.

"Red alert, Mr. Sulu!" Kirk's order was clear to the whole crew of four hundred and thirty; this meant battle stations. The electronic klaxon reverberated loudly throughout the whole ship, as officers began running down the corridors, checking various hazardous areas for any unauthorised personnel. Security officers were assigned to guard each area of the ship, while others took to their all-important posts.

Suddenly the bridge turbolift opened once again, and out stepped Lt. Pavel Chekov, who was to relieve the Weapons Officer.

The softly-lit bridge was now flooded by a harsh red light; around the walls each computer console appeared to be brightly-coloured and was being operated at maximum level by its user. A cacophony of loud voices was heard coming from the communication station as Cdr. Uhura attempted to quiet them down.

"Station please, Mr. Chekov," Kirk said.

"Aye, sir," Chekov replied as he waited for the officer to move out of her post.

"Engine room - Mr. Scott," Kirk said.

"Aye, sir," Scott replied hastily.

"Are you able to take this ship into battle?"

"Are you kiddin', Captain?" said Scott, who sounded quite anxious to go into battle. "I've been wantin' to see how she performs, but take it easy on her, will ye? Don't forget she's still new."

"No promises, Mr. Scott," Kirk said before he turned off the channel. "Mr. Chekov, stand by on photon torpedoes."

"Aye, sir, channels one and two are loaded," Chekov replied as he saw the target scan numbers move to the correct firing lines on his control setting monitor.

Spock turned to Saavik, who was still monitoring the vessel's approach. "Lieutenant, have you scanned the vessel's power supply?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, although it has some cloaking device which renders it invisible," she replied, looking him in the eye. "I cannot penetrate its internal structure, as it is made up of the same energy that blankets the Excelsior, but what I have found through the computer is quite fascinating." She continued to look at Spock. "I have made sensor readings on the ship's residual trail; it seems that it leaves a type of anti-matter trail."

"Be more specific, Lieutenant; what do you mean by 'type of anti-matter'?" Spock said, trying to find the most logical meaning in her answer, while Kirk listened intently.

"It registers as anti-matter for a few microseconds, then it just collapses into a simpler state of positive-matter. Therefore it is my assumption that the ship runs on pure anti-matter," Saavik said, hoping that her words were clear to Spock. "Yet I cannot understand how it can change its state so easily and quickly in a vacuum."

"As you understand life more clearly, Lieutenant, you will discover that there are things and ideas that we never thought could possibly exist but they do exist in certain ways." Saavik's eyes broke contact after Spock finished his small lecture on the unknown, and she continued seeking more information on the object.

Kirk then butted into their conversation, still wondering why the ship was rapidly advancing on them. "Have you found anything else, Saavik, that could throw a little more light on our situation?" he asked.

"Not at this moment, Captain," Saavik replied.

Turning away from the two Vulcanoid officers, Kirk then swung his chair at a forty five degree angle to the communications officer who was busy monitoring the vessel. "Uhura, have they tried to contact us in any way?"

"Negative, sir, not a murmur," was her quick reply.

"Captain, it's holding its position at one point two kilometres," Sulu said.

"Stand by, Mr. Chekov," Kirk said, knowing that the Weapons Officer was a

bit trigger happy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The invisible spacecraft held its position just beyond one kilometre from the Enterprise. What was it planning to do? Was it going to attack, or just monitor its adversary, waiting for the right moment to find out its weaknesses, then strike?

"Mr. Spock, what do you make of it?" Kirk questioned.

"I believe the vessel must be of a solid material, conveniently cloaked, as one would protect a wall from erosion with a coat of paint," Spock replied, raising his left eyebrow.

"Spock," Kirk said, with the look on his face of having a good idea, "is it possible that we can chip its invisible coat, if we attack it first, and thus give us a chance to scan it for any weaknesses?"

"Quite possible, Captain, assuming it doesn't fire first. But are we sure this is the same vessel which attacked the Excelsior? We have no indication that it did." Spock stared at Kirk, hoping he understood.

Kirk replied, "Let's hope your assumption is right, Spock," and turned his seat back to the forward position, to look at the empty screen. He then swivelled his chair to face Uhura. "Uhura, any communication yet?"

"Negative, Captain," Uhura said softly.

"Open a channel in all known languages to that ship; let's see if I can persuade them to talk," Kirk said.

"All hailing frequencies are open," Uhura replied.

Kirk stood up facing the huge screen.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship U.S.S. Enterprise. We have come on a mission of peace, in search of one of our missing vessels." The tone of his voice began to waver slightly. "If you do not reply we will be forced to protect ourselves, and the other ship... if necessary." Kirk then faced Uhura. "Anything?"

"Nothing yet, sir - wait!" she exclaimed.

Suddenly Uhura gave a loud scream, as though she felt the touch of death. It was her ear receiver that caused her outburst. Even Kirk could hear the very high pitched deafening sound from where he was sitting. She quickly pulled the receiver from her ear, and threw it hurriedly to the floor as though it was alive.

"Are you all right, Uhura?" asked McCoy.

"Just about," Uhura replied, rubbing her ear. "It's all right, Doctor, really," as McCoy gave her a concerned stare, then made an examination with a medical scanner which he always carried in his pocket for emergencies.

Kirk faced Uhura and McCoy and asked, "How is she, Bones?"

"She'll make it, she just had a large sound shock, that's all. Nothing to be worried about," McCoy answered with a light tone of reassurance.

Saavik then stood up from her station to allow Spock to take her place, as he was more experienced in these matters. Spock continued where Saavik had left off, making some final adjustments to her research before reporting it to the Captain.

"Captain," Spock called out, "I've made an analysis on that signal from Lt. Uhura's receiver transmission; it seems to be composed of different high-frequency signals all strung together. I am now programming our computer to separate each wavelength so we can work out the transmitted signal."

"Do you reckon, Spock, that their form of communication is highly advanced?" Kirk asked.

"There are many ways in which other alien races communicate. For example the Talosians use pure thought patterns, and, if memory serves, on Earth in what was Old America, the Wild West, Indian tribes communicated long-distance by what was known as smoke signals." Spock then turned back to the computer in front of him.

Saavik then placed a recording disk into the computer which was normally used for the ship's library purposes. "Ready, sir," Saavik said.

"Computer, scan data on recent signal. Question: is this signal a highly advanced form of communication?" Spock said.

"Affirmative," replied the computer.

"Computer, search other banks for similar uses."

"How do you account for the overload on the communicator panel, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Their signal must have been transmitted at such a high level that the computer circuits automatically burned out," Spock replied.

Spock then received the information he required on his screen, as well as vocally from the computer. "Planet Scalos, communication by subjects made at a high audible speed relative to their own space and time," the computer answered.

"Computer, any other related subjects?"

"Negative," replied the computer to Spock's question.

"Spock, is that ship still there?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, Captain, but the computer is still trying to decipher the signal."

"Captain, the energy shield around the vessel has gradually decreased," Saavik reported.

"Spock," Kirk ordered, knowing he would know what was expected of him.

"Scanning," Spock answered. "Sensors have penetrated the hull, showing a highly complex design," he went on with great interest. "It has a large humanoid-like crew of about sixty."

"Anything, Uhura?" Kirk said.

"Nothing right now, sir," she replied.

Kirk could feel the tension mounting in his body as he slowly, step by step, began to learn more about the unknown spacecraft and its inhabitants. *What do they want from us? Do they intend to capture or destroy us?*

Kirk remained motionless, staring at the screen as though there was something visible there.

Spock was still hard at work, discovering more fascinating information about the space vessel, while Saavik was aiding him closely with his research.

Across the void where the other alien spacecraft lay in wait, its occupants were also reaching a tense moment on how they should act. They saw that taking the Excelsior had been simple, but to take the Enterprise produced a new challenge. Would she be as easy as the other vessel, or harder?

The occupants of the alien vessel were rather tall, pale brown figures, about eight feet in height and having two slender pairs of arms. The first pair were positioned like the Humans', but the second pair were placed on top of the shoulders of the first pair, giving the subject a hunchback appearance when seen from the front, with a small Human-like head lower in the middle. Their legs, which also had a slender appearance, made up half their body height.

The commander of the ship stood near the centre of what was their bridge, a large, hexagonal room, having a large, round table of a highly complex design in the centre. Most of the walls were made up of flashing coloured lights; it needed only the wave of the hand over a certain light to change the ship's condition. This was controlled by the lower officers who were wearing skin-tight, green uniforms which held no kind of decoration but the protruding shapes of their body lines, which created symmetrical shadows on their bodies.

The commander of the ship, who was garbed in a dark purple uniform, began walking around his highly complex bridge, inspecting his crew carefully, making sure no errors were made which could leave the ship open for any sudden attack.

The way the officers of the ship carried out their tasks on the lighted control panels looked very difficult in theory, yet was very simple in practice as they waved their hands over the lights which simultaneously changed colour, giving a traffic-light effect to the control panel.

After the commander had made his inspection of the crew, he then moved back to the table's edge and glanced over at the large, glowing white disc at the centre, which had a three foot radius, leaving only a few inches for the table's rim. The commander's second officer then stood up, on the opposite side of the table from his work station, waiting for a reaction from his superior.

The commander then swept his upper limb hand over the table's edge, thus causing the whole table's perimeter to glow in a mixture of red and yellow colours. The white disc began to lose its glow, and slowly darkened until it was as black as space itself. In fact the image was of space, showing a large saucer-shaped craft with two rectangular engines parallel behind it, holding a fixed position in the centre of their table screen.

The commander then spoke to his Second Officer in a totally alien language, unknown to any person in the Federation.

"Sergeant Throogue, what is your opinion of that vessel?"

"It is indeed one of a highly advanced culture, like the other one but smaller. Yet it has the ability to attack us with noises, which have so far impacted some of our systems. With our defence shield lowered, we have the chance of surprise while they still scan us, thinking we are defenceless," replied Sergeant Throogue.

"The signal we transmitted to them should be quite a shocker," the commander said. "Yet little will they know that it is their own signal, amplified by our

shields when it impacted on us."

Back on the Enterprise bridge, technicians were hard at work effecting repairs to the communications panel while Uhura waited until they finished.

Spock and his protegee Saavik were still busy working out the signal while Kirk was thinking silently about his invisible enemy that stood between him and the Excelsior. Suddenly the turbolift doors opened revealing Dr. Peterson, who was himself wondering what the alert status was for. As he stepped onto the bridge nobody seemed to notice his presence. He felt that his position was of no importance to anyone.

"What's going on, Captain Kirk?"

Kirk turned around in his chair to face the person who questioned him. He didn't look too pleased at the sight of Peterson. Kirk then turned back to the main screen as though he had not seen Peterson on the bridge.

"Your guess is as good as mine, Dr. Peterson," he said at last, "and if you don't mind, I would prefer not to have you on my bridge. You forget you're a passenger on my ship, and I detest passengers who waltz around my ship as if they own it."

Peterson looked sternly at Kirk, then faced the screen to see what Kirk was looking at. Seeing only the Excelsior in the distance, Peterson began to feel very curious about Kirk's actions. "Why are we stationed here?"

"For your information, Doctor, something is blocking our path. If you'll excuse me, I've a ship to command."

Peterson walked to the lift, then turned his head to Kirk who remained unmoving, ignoring him. Peterson entered the lift just as he had exited it; silently.

Finally Spock stood up from his chair, which indicated that he had some important information to impart. "Captain," he called out to the figure in the centre seat.

"What have you got for us, Spock?" answered Kirk, hoping Spock had some good news to give.

"I've managed to find out what the signal was." Spock then played back the recorded signal on the main bridge speaker.

The voice from the speaker sounded, "This is Captain James T. Kirk of the starship...."

Spock paused, saying nothing, as he stopped the recording, which sounded all too familiar.

"Well, is that it, Spock?" McCoy reacted to Spock's findings, who in turn stared at him. Feeling rather tired of Spock's stubbornness, McCoy said, "You've got all the damn answers, why don't you tell us what it means?"

"This was the signal we received, yet we received it at such a high speed and at different frequencies that it came out as just one loud signal. This signal was the result of the transmission we made, which must have bounced off their shields and amplified at the same time," Spock said.

"That explains the signal; what about the ship and where it came from?" Kirk replied, looking rather disappointed at the information provided for him.

"I have no further data as to where the ship originated," Spock said.

"Speculate, Spock."

"My speculation will not be an estimation, therefore I believe it will be best to consult the computer." Spock then turned to Saavik. "Lt Saavik, search the memory banks to find any planets in this sector."

"Yes, sir," was her answer. Her slender fingers began to punch away at the numerous buttons on the console in front of her. After only a few seconds of searching the computer's memory banks, Saavik finally came out with a promising answer, which was quickly displayed as a colourful graphic image on the small screen just to her left. "Captain, I have a result from the computer," Saavik said.

Kirk then turned his command chair towards Saavik; he quickly stood up and moved to where she was sitting so he could see what the result was for himself. Spock also turned to Saavik's monitor and studied it carefully.

"What do you have for us, Lieutenant?" Kirk said.

"There are three planets close by in this sector. One is incapable of supporting life as we know it. The other two are twin planets, both similar in size and mass, which is very rare, yet both are class M, and have oxygen atmospheres and are able to support life, though only for a short period of time." After she finished her speech, Spock told Kirk why the planets could only hold life for a short time.

The reason was that the planets were quite a distance away from their neighbouring star. Only during the day time, which lasted twenty hours, was it safe, because during the night the planets' temperature froze one hundred degrees below zero for twelve hours.

"Saavik, has that ship moved yet?" said Kirk.

"Negative, Captain, it's still holding its position."

"It's time one of us made the first move." Kirk then turned to Sulu. "Mr. Sulu, take us in slowly, at one third impulse power."

"Aye sir, one third impulse power," replied Sulu.

Gradually the Enterprise moved in closer and closer to the invisible force, every step bringing the Enterprise closer and closer to danger, never knowing what the enemy would do to the Enterprise. Yet still the enemy remained motionless, as though it never saw the Enterprise move.

"Any reaction from the other ship, Spock?"

"Negative, Captain. However, their shields are now fully lowered," Spock said.

"Hold position," Kirk ordered.

"Aye sir," Sulu replied.

"It's a trap; they're trying to bait us like a fish to a hook," Kirk said, knowing his instinct was correct, as though he had been through this situation before. "Mr. Chekov, stand by to fire on my command."

"Aye sir, systems locked," Chekov replied in his distinctive Russian accent.

Slowly the invisible ship began to advance towards the Enterprise. Its

intentions were unknown to the Enterprise, but with Human instincts, the crew knew that it wasn't going to be an easy mission to pull off.

On the other ship the alien crew felt tense at this moment, as the Commander gave the order to his Second Officer. "Sergeant Throogue," the commander said in a very low voice.

"Yes, Commander, what is your bidding?" replied Throogue in the same tone.

"Raise the shield and prepare to fire disruptor beam."

"Target has been clearly laid," Throogue replied instantly.

Still the Enterprise held its position, knowing that it was a trap.

"Captain, the vessel is moving closer at a very slow but steady speed," Spock said to Kirk.

"Mr. Chekov, are our shields still operating fully?"

"Yes, Captain," Chekov said.

The commander of the alien vessel then looked at his Second Officer sharply. "Fire disruptors!"

Throogue waved his hand over one of the lights on the round table's edge; as he did the table perimeter changed to a bright red colour. Then suddenly the invisible ship emitted a bright, narrow beam of red light that flashed angrily towards the Enterprise. Looking from space, the beam of light appeared to come from nowhere.

"Captain, the vessel just raised its shields and fired an energy beam of some kind!" Spock exclaimed, looking through the science station scanner.

The Enterprise crew did not react quickly enough to Spock's warning. The beam of light hit the ship at strategic points, but did not penetrate her hull. The whole ship vibrated violently, and officers were thrown out of their chairs and onto the floor.

"Are our shields holding?" Kirk called to Chekov.

Chekov lifted himself from the floor and checked the computer shield monitor. "Just about, sir. Another hit like that and it will buckle," he replied, regaining his breath.

"Fire torpedoes!" Kirk ordered.

Chekov pressed the trigger joystick on his console to execute the order. The Enterprise fired two torpedoes one after the other at the invisible enemy, using the science station scanners to track its position. The torpedoes resembled little stars of orange light as they headed for the opposing vessel. Suddenly the torpedoes detonated on the vessel.

The results were devastating. Officers inside the ship were being thrown around the ship as the torpedoes impacted on its hull. The lights on the vessel wall reacted violently as they absorbed the energy from the impacting photon torpedoes. The Commander stood up from the floor, using the table's edge as a prop to lift himself up. His Second Officer, who was already standing, looked around at the other officers, making sure they were still at their posts.

"Commander, our ship appears to be intact," said Second Officer Throogue.

"Retreat! It was unexpected that they would retaliate so suddenly after our attack," replied the Commander, who felt rather humiliated.

"Good shooting, Mr. Chekov!" Kirk praised, with a small smile coming to his face. "Engine room - any damage, Scotty?"

"Just rather shaken, Captain," Scott replied abruptly.

"She's getting away, Keptin, shall we make chase?" asked Chekov.

"And do what, Mr. Chekov? Talking to them is useless. Negative, hold position," Kirk ordered. "Status report, Spock?" he went on immediately.

"The ship appears to be unharmed; only minor casualties amongst the crew, some are reported on their way to sickbay," Spock said, giving McCoy, who was still on the bridge looking rather shaken, a very broad hint as to where his duties lay.

"I was just about to leave, Mr. Spock, after being frightened out of my wits," McCoy said sharply, looking at Kirk as the person to blame.

"Really, Dr. McCoy, you must learn to control your emotions," Spock said.

"Now that's something I can do without, coming from you," McCoy replied, then walked into the turbolift, with the doors closing after him.

"Cancel red alert," Kirk ordered, knowing that they were out of danger for the time being.

An hour after the short battle, the Enterprise held a fixed position where they had first confronted the invisible ship. The Captain was still wondering where the other ship had disappeared to after the Enterprise counter-attacked. Kirk was still sitting in his command chair, thinking what he should do next. Should he mount a search operation as Chekov had suggested before, or continue with his specific order, which was to find and retrieve the Excelsior crew, if there were any who survived?

"Spock, anything on that other ship?"

Spock, who was seated facing his scanner, turned to look at Kirk. "Nothing to report at this time, Captain. It appears the other vessel managed to escape while we were occupied with ourselves. But I believe our torpedoes made a direct hit."

Kirk then turned his chair back around to face the screen and for a minute thought carefully. Finally he decided to follow his original orders. "Helm, set a course back to the Excelsior, steady as she goes. Let's go see what's going on there."

"Aye, sir," Sulu said.

The Enterprise slowly manoeuvred in the Excelsior's direction, still hoping that the other vessel wouldn't make a surprise attack.

On the large screen on the bridge, the image of the Excelsior gradually increased in size as the Enterprise converged on it. Officers who were supposed to be minding their stations began to stare with curiosity at the other Federation vessel, which looked lifeless as the detailed image came nearer.

What had actually happened to her? Was there anybody alive on that ship? Why was she attacked in the first place? These were questions that filled the minds of many officers, who stared at the lifeless piece of machinery floating aimlessly in the darkness of space.

Kirk himself began to wonder, how could a battleship so highly complex, with the best technology the Federation could devise, and a highly experienced crew and Captain, be easily defeated by a force he seemed to have overcome?

With the Enterprise now at a distance of ten thousand metres from the Excelsior and closing, the crew began to feel more uneasy about what new problem would be facing them when they reached the ship.

Spock, who was still involved with the scanner, found some new readings to report. "Captain, the energy field that blanketed the Excelsior is gone. It is my theory that the cloaked vessel created a shield envelope around itself and the Excelsior. Probably they were trying to take or transplant something on her, which is why they used the shield to prevent anything from trying to stop them."

"Is that what you suggest happened, Spock?" Kirk replied, feeling Spock's words were true.

"It is only what I logically assume." Spock stared blandly at Kirk. "There may be an alternative, Captain, if you know of any."

"No, not really, Spock," Kirk grinned. He stood up from his chair to recirculate the blood flow in his legs, which felt rather numb after he been seated in his chair for over an hour. "What is our status, Mr. Sulu?"

"Now at eight hundred metres and closing, sir," Sulu replied.

"When we reach two hundred metres, hold position."

"Aye sir."

Two minutes after Kirk's order, Sulu stopped the Enterprise as the Captain had requested at two hundred metres, no more, no less.

Kirk then looked around him. "Spock, Saavik, Mr. Sulu - to the briefing room. Uhura, signal Dr. McCoy and Dr. Peterson and his assistant to go there on the double."

"Aye sir," Uhura said as she verbally transmitted the order into her communications console. "Sickbay, Dr. McCoy!"

McCoy, who was in the middle of finishing off his report, answered Uhura's transmission. "McCoy here, what is it?"

"You are to report to the briefing room as soon as possible," Uhura answered.

"I'm on my way. McCoy out!" the doctor replied as he turned off the intercom switch before leaving his office.

Uhura then transmitted the same order to both Dr. Peterson and his assistant Roger Ruty; their answer was similar to McCoy's.

"They're all on their way now, sir," Uhura reported to Kirk, as he was just about to make his way to the turbolift with the other officers.

"Mr. Chekov!" Kirk called to the seated Weapons Officer who was at the moment doing nothing of any value.

Quickly Chekov turned in reaction to his name being called out, and faced Kirk who was by the door. "Yes, sir?"

"You have the con," Kirk answered with a smile as he left the bridge in the control of the able Russian officer.

"Aye sir," replied Chekov.

The doors quickly closed after Kirk entered the turbolift with the other officers, and Chekov took his position in the centre seat as ordered.

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the way to the briefing room, Kirk, Spock, Saavik and Sulu spotted Dr. McCoy walking towards them from sickbay. They met at the briefing room doors, and walked into the room together. On entering, they found Dr. Peterson and his assistant, Roger Ruty, already seated at the far side of the long briefing table, talking together.

Each officer took the nearest seat, except the Captain who sat at the far end of the unusually shaped briefing table, and Spock who sat at the library computer which jutted out from the side of the table.

"I know what you are thinking right now - what are we doing stationed here?" Kirk said, before explaining the situation.

"Why aren't we boarding the Excelsior yet, Captain, when we're within beaming range of her?" Dr. Peterson asked, staring at Kirk.

"Doctor, that is what the other vessel wants us to do, so they can lead us into a surprise attack," Spock replied to Peterson's question. Peterson made no argument against Spock's logical answer.

Kirk then spoke out, breaking the eye contact between Spock and Peterson. "Yes, that's what I said a while back; the Excelsior could be their bait. But what I don't understand is why they should want to attack us when we've done nothing to offend them."

"Probably we're intruding in their space, Captain," Saavik said coolly, looking at the Captain.

"Quite true, Lieutenant, but other Federation ships have been through here before without being preyed upon. There have been a couple of unexplained losses in the last twenty or so years, but... why this confrontation now of all times?" Kirk said, as his words created speculation amongst the other officers at the table.

"Is it possible that the Excelsior could be interfering in some alien plan by just being in this sector at the wrong time?" Sulu said.

"That sounds like a good possibility. We could well be intruding in some alien scheme by being here. But what would they want from the Excelsior?" Kirk replied to Sulu's rather promising suggestion.

"Captain, if I may," Spock said, and Kirk nodded agreement. "If we agree Mr. Sulu's assumption is correct, then we must know their plans for this space sector. If they are to continue their attacks on Federation ships, we must find what they are trying to hide from us, how it involves us, and what their motives are for attacking other ships. It seems illogical to attack without any basis for action or decision. What we should know is, what will be the consequences for both them and us when their task is fulfilled."

"How does that involve them taking and holding the Excelsior, Mr. Spock?" McCoy asked, trying to outwit the almost flawless Vulcan mind.

"There could be some materials on the Excelsior that may prove of use to the other ship's survival. But of the crew, I have yet to know more of their condition."

"Condition, Mr. Spock?" McCoy said sharply at Spock's wording.

"Is my phrase in error, Doctor?" Spock asked coolly.

McCoy's reaction was even sharper at Spock's increasingly emotionless tone. "When are you ever in error, Mr. Spock? Has it occurred to you that the whole crew could be already dead, all five hundred of them?"

"Spock, I have a suggestion!" Kirk suddenly butted into McCoy's argument.

"What do you have in mind, Captain?" Spock asked.

"Let's play into their hands. If we take Mr. Sulu's suggestion as being correct, we should be prepared for any surprise attack, as it is our mission to discover what is wrong with the Excelsior."

"That's suicide, Captain!" exclaimed Roger Ruty. "If you remember there were over five hundred officers on that ship. What happened to them could happen to us!"

"It is our only alternative in finding a peaceful solution and avoiding further bloodshed. That is unless you have another suggestion, Mr. Ruty?" The young, red-haired scientist said nothing in reply to Spock's words.

"They tried to attack us but we were ready for them, whereas Captain Styles was not, which is why we are still here," Kirk said, then looked at Saavik. "Saavik, prepare a boarding party. We will attempt to board the Excelsior. That will mean beaming into the engineering room, so Scotty and Peterson can do their work. Spock, you have the Enterprise; if you find the other ship approaching, decoy it away from the Excelsior while we try to get it working. But keep within our range just in case anything happens."

"Understood, Captain," Spock responded.

Kirk then touched the intercom on the table surface. "Engine room. Scotty!"

"Aye sir, Scott here!" Scott replied, shouting over the hum of the engine room noise.

"Report to the transporter room; we're preparing to board the Excelsior."

"I'm on my way, Scott out!"

"Dr. Peterson, Mr. Ruty, Saavik and Bones to the transporter room," Kirk immediately ordered, leaving Sulu and Spock back where they belonged.

Spock, who was now seated in the centre seat on the bridge, spoke into the chair intercom to the transporter room. "Captain, we're ready."

"Very well, Spock," Kirk said as he stood on the transporter platform, ready to beam out. "Energize!" he ordered the transporter officer.

Slowly the molecules of the six forms on the transporter platform dissolved

into thin air and their bodies' atoms once again reassembled on the engineering deck of the Excelsior. At the moment Kirk and his party appeared on the ship, their vision was darkened, as their eyes were not accustomed to the dim light of the engineering deck. There was silence apart from the low hum of the reserve power units.

Kirk's first order was clear as he quickly waved his arms outwards towards the other officers who encircled him. "Spread out!" Kirk said as his voice reverberated around the deck, making sure the others received his message.

Slowly Scott, Peterson, Saavik, Ruty and McCoy began to disperse from their positions.

"Scotty, see if you can find out how much power there is left in this baby."

"Aye, Captain, I'll get on it right away," Scott replied.

Suddenly there was a high-pitched metallic humming sound emanating from behind a large, steel wall. It was Saavik, who happened to activate her tricorder as she was looking for any lifeform readings in the vicinity.

"Where did everybody go?" McCoy asked curiously as he slowly walked away, nearing one of the exits to the other levels.

"This ship appears to be running on auxiliary power, but why?" Kirk asked himself, taking no notice of McCoy's question.

"Indeterminate lifeform readings!" Saavik said.

"Whereabouts, Saavik?" Kirk asked, hoping that there was still someone aboard to talk to about what had happened to this ship.

"Just above us, possibly two decks up. Only one lifeform."

"Scotty!" Kirk called out as his voice echoed throughout the deck as he couldn't see him anywhere near him.

"Over here, Captain," Scott's voice echoed back.

"Where?"

"Just above you, sir, on the balcony!"

"Anything to report?"

"Reserve power is down seventy five per cent; it appears we're running on batteries. And Captain, we only have twelve hours left before it's completely exhausted," Scott reported, feeling sorry not just for the ship, but also for everyone, for it meant they had to work twice as fast and hard.

"What about the dilithium crystals?" Kirk asked.

"I'll go see." Scott quickly walked over to one of the dilithium monitoring boards just behind him. To his amazement the meters didn't register what they were supposed to; he tapped the board a couple of times to make sure it wasn't an error. But he knew they had to be true readings. "Captain, they're gone!"

"That's what they must have been after, the crystals!" Kirk said, feeling that this alien puzzle was slowly coming together.

"Why?" Scott said.

"Possibly for their ship."

Suddenly Kirk's communicator gave out two distinctive high-pitched bleeps. He pulled it from his belt, and opened its protective grilled cover. "Kirk here."

"Jim, it's McCoy." McCoy's tone of voice sounded rather serious over the communicator, as though he had made a rather important discovery.

"Bones, where are you?"

"Level twenty one, two decks above."

"What have you got?"

"It's best for you to come and see for yourself."

"I'm on my way," Kirk replied as he placed his communicator back on his belt. "Scotty, see what you can do about getting this ship more power, or else we will be tripping over our own feet in a couple of hours."

"Aye sir," Scott replied. "I've a good idea of what to do."

Kirk began to look around for the two science engineers, and found them just behind him, looking at the large, inert intermix chambers. "Dr. Peterson, Mr. Ruty!"

Peterson's voice echoed in the distance. "Yes, Captain?"

"You'll be assisting Mr. Scott on the ship's engines while the rest of us will be exploring."

"As you wish, Captain," replied Peterson, speaking also for Ruty, who did not respond to Kirk's order.

"Saavik!"

"Over here, Captain," she replied, still positioned behind the wall.

Kirk strolled towards her, curious to see what she was up to behind the wall. Saavik felt his presence behind her, and also saw his fuzzed, distorted, shadowy outline which grew larger and larger as he neared her, covering the wall console to the side of her.

"Captain, I have been looking through the ship's library computers one by one; it appears they have all been erased," Saavik said to Kirk's shadow but not to his face, as she was still involved with the computer.

"Lieutenant, that can wait. We'd better hurry up to where McCoy is, he may have something for us."

"Yes, Captain," Saavik said as she turned around to follow Kirk towards the turbolifts which were now running at half power.

The turbolift doors opened as it reached the level required by Kirk and Saavik. As soon as Saavik alighted from the turbocar, she again activated her tricorder, putting all her trust into what it would read, as it emitted a low, pulsating, bleating noise every second.

Kirk again pulled out his communicator which beeped as he opened its grid, and spoke into it. "Where are you, Bones?"

"In one of the officer's quarters - Lt. R. Watson, number two hundred and

twenty five, just by the officers' mess."

"Got it! Stay there, we're on our way," Kirk said, then closed his communi- cator. "Where the hell is the officers' mess?" he asked himself, being on a ship which was different from and larger than his Enterprise, and newer in design.

"Captain, I have picked up two lifeform readings; one of them seems to be injured, its breathing is unstable, and I believe the other belongs to Dr. McCoy," Saavik reported, looking at her tricorder.

"Which direction, Saavik?"

She quickly aimed her tricorder in the direction which produced the strongest signal, and then took a fix on its course. "This way, Captain," she said, following its point of origin, somewhere down a dimly lit corridor.

As they neared the source of the signal, Kirk stopped, seeing the sign 'Mess Hall' just opposite him. Knowing he was close by, he then followed the numbered doors of the officers' quarters in the corridor. As he walked along the corridor, he ignored the side which had the even numbers printed on the doors and remained on the side which had odd, remembering the number McCoy had told him ended in a five.

"Two thirty one, two twenty nine, two twenty seven," Kirk said as he followed the door numbers. Saavik's tricorder began to bleep faster and faster with every step she took as she followed Kirk, who was very sure of himself. "Here we are, two twenty five!" Kirk said to himself and Saavik who was just behind him. The doors opened into a small room which Kirk and Saavik entered. Suddenly a recognisable voice called out to Kirk from another part of the room.

"Jim, over here!"

"Bones?" Kirk answered. Kirk quickly followed the voice into the sleeping area. Saavik wandered about the room. On the bed was a young officer who looked dead, the body motionless. Kirk noticed that it was a female by the way the dull light cast deep shadowy lines on her slim figure, followed the smooth, rounded outlines of her head, and ended with her dark, long hair which lay loose and dangled slightly over the bedside. Her looks showed her to be in her mid-twenties, about the same as Saavik. Standing next to her was McCoy, who looked rather concerned for her wellbeing.

"What kept you, Jim?" McCoy demanded as he saw Kirk enter.

"I was trying to find the right door," Kirk replied. "Is she alone, Bones?"

"It appears so. I followed the same signal as Saavik and I just found her lying on the floor by the door."

Kirk then walked closer to the bedside to examine her face, as he thought he might recognise her, but he didn't. "How is she, Bones?"

"She has a slight concussion and I also found that she tried to take an overdose of some strong sleeping sedative." McCoy picked up the hypodermic spray from the bedside table and showed Kirk its level indicator, which read empty.

"Any reason why?"

"Maybe she couldn't cope with being alone on the ship for this long. I've seen it happen before, people become delirious, and then they try to end it all," McCoy replied softly.

After studying the other room for any unusual alien evidence but finding

nothing, Saavik quietly entered the sleeping compartment to see what Kirk and McCoy were up to. Seeing the body lying on the bed, she curiously made a closer examination of the comatose officer herself. Saavik was almost surprised as she stared at the victim, who reminded her of a girl she had known quite well for a short while back at the Starfleet Academy. She then remembered the name printed on the officer's door, Lt. R. Watson. She placed the name in her thoughts beside the subject's features, and confirmed definitely who it was. "Robin Watson!" Saavik said aloud, knowing it was she.

"What was that, Lieutenant?" McCoy asked.

"Her name is Robin Watson, a lieutenant like myself. We both graduated from the Academy at the same time. I did not think that she would take service aboard a starship." Saavik slowly took the lieutenant's right hand in her own, hoping that the comfort would help restore her health. "She was a good friend to me." Kirk and McCoy noticed Saavik's emotions showing clearly as she continued to hold Robin's hand tightly. They had never seen a Vulcan show emotion, apart from Spock. But Saavik was no ordinary Vulcan; deep within herself she knew she still had her savage Romulan side, yet her Vulcan training allowed her to bury it within her subconscious mind.

"Is there anything you can do for her, Bones?" Kirk asked for McCoy's professional opinion.

"I dare not give her anything right now, it may increase the danger of her never coming out of the coma. Only thing is to get her back to the Enterprise."

"You must try now, Bones, it's our only hope of knowing what went on here!" Kirk's plea made McCoy's decision an even harder one, knowing that if he even tried he could plunge her deeper into a coma.

"I'll do my very best, Jim," McCoy replied, knowing the risk he had to take was one worth trying.

As all three officers continued to stare at the unconscious girl the room's dim lighting suddenly brightened, dazzling their vision as their eyes were just about accustomed to the dim lighting. Kirk quickly pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Scott!"

"You called, Captain?"

"Well done, Scotty, what did you do?"

"I took the dilithium crystals from the ship's phaser banks, but it's only enough to get us moving, not full warp capability."

"Agreed, Scotty, I always knew you were a miracle worker," Kirk replied happily, hoping that other upcoming situations would be just as easy. "Listen, Scotty, if you have the time, get to the bridge and see if anything there needs sorting out. Kirk out!"

"Well, Jim, what now?"

"This ship's going to have to move!"

"You can't expect to command this whole ship with six when it takes a crew of over five hundred to run her!" McCoy said angrily.

"I don't intend to," Kirk replied, then quickly changed the subject. "Don't you have some work to do, Doctor?"

"Not in here. I'll need to use the sickbay surgery, that is if it's still intact."

"I'll assist you, Doctor," offered Saavik.

"Good idea, Lieutenant. Meanwhile, I'll go see what Scotty's doing," Kirk said as he quickly left the officer's quarters, leaving McCoy and Saavik to tend the patient.

"Come on, Lieutenant, let's go," McCoy ordered, as he was just about to pick up his patient.

"I suggest it would be best if I carry her to sickbay, Doctor. I am more capable than yourself," Saavik said, as she gently lifted her friend off the bed. McCoy stared in awe at Saavik's strength as she carried his patient as though she weighed no more than a baby of a year old. McCoy stood out of Saavik's way to let her pass through the doors first, with his patient in her arms.

"After you, Lieutenant." He held out his arm towards the door as a sign of his courtesy.

The turbolift doors parted as Kirk exited the car onto the spacious Excelsior bridge. Its size and complexity astounded him as he carefully inspected the area. All the computer consoles, the science, communications, helm and navigator posts appeared to be fully functional with their colourful displays flashing on and off, but without an officer to tend to them. As he continued to gaze, he saw he wasn't the only one on the bridge. He saw one lonely figure lying face upwards under the engineering station, who appeared not to notice Kirk's approach.

Kirk called out, already knowing who it was, "How's it going down there, Scotty?"

The plumpish Scotsman slowly sat up and looked at Kirk, who towered over him. "Captain, it's a mess of circuits down here. It will be some time before she's ready to move properly."

"How long will it take?" Kirk wondered.

"Maybe twenty four hours....but I see you haven't got twenty four hours, so I'll try as hard as I can, sir," Scott replied, as he lay back down under the console.

"Now where have I heard that before?" Kirk said jokingly.

As Scott continued his repair efforts, trying to restore what he could, Kirk headed towards the communications console and began to fiddle around with its numerous knobs and switches. At this point Kirk's priority was how to transmit a signal to his own ship.

"Scotty, is communications still functioning?"

"Aye sir, it is," Scott replied as he continued his work.

Kirk quickly solved this ship's subspace comm, with minor difficulties. It was similar to his own ship's, but with a few more new gadgets here and there. Suddenly the green monocolour graphics appeared above him on the monitor, displaying the patterns of various communications channels, but it was not what he really wanted. By a sheer accident, he tripped the hailing frequency switch, setting off its graphic display on the blank monitor to his left.

"Here we are," Kirk mumbled to himself as the characters, 'Hailing frequencies five three seven,' appeared in small letters at the base of the

monitor. The fluorescent signal strength bar readings began to fluctuate erratically as he quickly programmed a short signal aimed at the Enterprise. Hoping that his programming setting was correct, he opened a hailing frequency to his ship. "Kirk to Enterprise, come in!"

On the Enterprise bridge all was quiet, as Spock was now in control. There was no time for any humour, as he thought of it as being quite illogical in their present situation. Uhura, who was still at her station wearing rather a bland expression as she tirelessly monitored her comm console, suddenly noticed an incoming message displayed on her primary subspace channel, which was only used for ship to ship communication between Federation vessels. "Mr. Spock, a signal from the Excelsior. It's from the Captain."

"Patch it through to my station, Commander," Spock ordered.

Suddenly a very loud, recognisable voice spoke out from the large Excelsior bridge speaker, which Kirk accessed from the console as he had no ear receiver. The sound of Spock's voice amplified six times the normal strength gave even Scott a scare as the noise blasted out onto the bridge and into his eardrums.

"Whoops!" Kirk said, as he quickly reacted, turning the volume control to minimum level.

"Spock here, Captain. Is everything proceeding as predicted?"

"Everything's fine here," Kirk replied with relief, glad to hear Spock's voice again. "Anything to report on that other ship?"

"Negative, Captain, there is still no indication of their presence in our vicinity."

"Keep up the good work, Spock - oh yes, I'll need an extra three engineers, and Mr. Sulu to run the helm of this ship, plus two other officers who are not on active duty to report to the Excelsior bridge." Sulu began to grin happily when he heard Kirk's order for him to control the helm of the Federation's newest and biggest starship.

"Understood, Captain. I take it the Excelsior is now fully functional?" Spock asked, wondering why Kirk needed more officers transported over.

"It appears so, Spock. Scott removed the dilithium crystals from the ship's phaser banks, as the aliens appear to have appropriated the main crystals for no known reason." Kirk again began to wonder why they had stolen them.

"What of the ship's crew and Captain Styles - are they alive?"

"The ship was already empty when we arrived, with the exception of one officer who has been in a coma since we beamed aboard."

"It seems quite illogical for a whole ship's complement to disappear, with the exception of one person. The officer must have been well hidden to avoid detection by any alien device," Spock remarked, giving Kirk new ideas as to what could have happened. "Do you require my presence on board the Excelsior, Captain?"

"No, Spock, it's not necessary. I've got Saavik, she'll be fine," Kirk replied, knowing that Spock felt as though he was being left out of the adventure on the Excelsior. But Kirk knew that Spock was the only officer qualified to take his place in the centre seat, which was where he wanted him, just in case anything out of the ordinary happened.

"Captain, your officers are on their way now."

"Very good, Spock. I'll contact you when we're ready to move. Kirk out!"

"She's ready, Captain!" Scott called out, as he carefully closed the small circuit hatch under the engineering console.

"I thought it was going to take quite a while, Scotty." Kirk walked around to where Scott was still lying.

"I thought so too, until I found the cause of the problem, a faulty module." Scott slowly lifted himself from the floor until he was at eye level with his Captain. "Here you go, sir, one faulty module," handing over the small cartridge to Kirk as evidence.

"Mr. Scott, your talent is amazing."

"Aye sir!" Scott replied happily.

The Excelsior sickbay; a sickbay like many others - neat, very sterile, with a strong acidic smell of cleaning fluids, and always quiet, as there was never anyone to talk to, because it was known to be the place everyone would always try to avoid at all costs. It was an area for life and death, for any unlucky person who entered it. Now the silence was lost to the deep-toned, pulsating noise of the heart monitor which was emanating from the surgery area.

McCoy and Saavik were standing at the bedside of the young officer who was still heavily sedated. McCoy's eye was not trained on his unconscious patient, but on the electroencephalograph monitor which was fixed to the wall just above her head. He continued to take note of its illuminated bar code readings which held a fixed line which had never budged an inch since her arrival on the operating table.

"Her brain patterns seem to be stable but her pulse and respiratory rate look dangerously low," McCoy said, as he continued to stare upwards.

"Doctor!" Saavik spoke out, catching McCoy's full attention. "I have a suggestion which might be safer for the patient. She will not need to be aware of the situation and it will not require your full attention during the process." Saavik's eyes met McCoy's, sensing by something in his eyes that he would not like what she was about to propose. She then broke contact and stared at the floor, feeling sorry for what she had just said. McCoy noticed her reaction, and spoke out, wondering what would help their situation.

"Just tell me, Lieutenant, what do you have in mind - a Vulcan mind-meld?"

"If you wish to phrase it that way, yes."

"Well....we'll just have to wait for the Captain to decide."

"Yes, Doctor. But it would seem a logical thing to do."

CHAPTER NINE

Far away, in the same unexplored sector of space as the Enterprise and the Excelsior, the enemy ship maintained a standard orbit around one of the three planets discovered by Lt. Saavik.

There was silence in the huge, dimly lit hold of the alien ship. It seemed rather bare, with only thirty large, glass-like cubes stacked in three long rows of ten. Each of the cubes' faces had a misted look about it which meant that

no-one could look out from or into the cubes themselves, but it was certain at this time that they were all occupied, as it was almost possible to see distorted, foggy figures moving aimlessly about within the cubes, but there was no sound at all emanating from any of them. Every so often, eight foot tall, heavily armed guards would march up and down the rows of cubes, making sure nothing out of the ordinary occurred that would put the ship and crew in any danger.

Imprisoned within these cubes were what remained of the Excelsior's crew. Having so many prisoners, the aliens caged the Earthers seventeen to each cube, which was almost its maximum capacity, but was just enough for them to move around freely. It felt claustrophobic to those imprisoned, as they feared the oxygen would dissipate the longer they remained imprisoned, but some knew that it would still be in plentiful supply, with the use of some ingenious mechanism unknown to their technology.

The prisoners themselves believed that they were the only survivors of the Excelsior as they could make no visual or sound contact with any of the other cubes; they had thought so since they had been instantly dematerialised from their ship by some strange transporter-like energy field.

What do they want? Why have they done this? These were the thoughts that occupied many of the captive crew who remained helpless, but still there were those who were constantly battling on for a way out. As some crewmembers continued thumping the translucent walls frenetically with their bare fists until they were badly bruised and bloodied, they finally discovered that however hard they tried to make themselves heard, their cries never seemed to penetrate the walls of their cage. But deep within they felt that this barrier could not cage them forever. Within Human laws of science they believed that if there's a way in, there's always a way out, but they seemed to disregard the fact that the universal laws they were bound by were not always constant elsewhere in the vastness of space and time.

Those others who preferred to just sit quietly and calmly tried to pass the time by watching their friends and wondering if they would ever make it out alive. Little did they know that the Enterprise was out there looking for them.

In one of the cubes at the far end of the ship's hold sat a rather bewildered Captain. His other officers had nothing much to say to help their situation.

Styles suddenly looked up at one of his officers who was pacing constantly from one wall to the other. "Why don't you sit down, Bates? You're giving me a damned headache, walking up and down!"

The middle-aged officer paused and turned to face the seated Captain. "I'm sorry, Captain, but there has to be some logical way out of here!" He then turned away from the Captain and continued walking in short strides. To and fro he continued, like an everlasting yoyo, until it became too much for Styles to take, listening to his footsteps tapping constantly across the floor.

"For God's sake, stop it!" Styles exclaimed.

"Sorry, sir," Bates replied, as he ceased his annoying habit.

"Sir!" another officer suddenly spoke. Styles turned immediately toward the officer who had requested his attention.

"Yes, Lt. Karras?" Styles replied.

The female Andorian officer looked at him seriously before she spoke.

"Is it possible that your message reached a Federation outpost?"

"A subspace message takes time to reach its objective. Yes, I believe they understood it. They should have a ship out looking for us." Styles tried to believe what he said was true, and hoped the others who heard him would take him at his word.

Lt. Bates suddenly blurted out, "Will they be surprised when they discover our ship is crewless! Or there may not even be any Excelsior to find - they could have destroyed her!"

"We'll have less of that kind of talk, Mister, understood?"

"But sir!" Bates pleaded.

"Understood, Lieutenant?" Styles produced a forceful expression on his face as he still waited solidly for his Lieutenant to obey.

"Aye sir," Bates said in a sulky tone.

"That's more like it. Any more of that and you'll be close to insubordination. Do I make myself clearly understood?"

"Yes, sir," replied Bates, with a rebellious look, but Styles ignored it.

Styles stood up and looked around, making the other sixteen officers pay attention. "Listen, everybody!" he called. "It appears we're all trapped here. I don't know why or how. We could be the only survivors; I'm not really sure about the others because of this damn prison! But remember this, it is normal procedure for Starfleet to send out a search and rescue party in the event of a ship not logging in to an outpost for a month. In the meantime, we will wait patiently and try to find a way to reason it out with these aliens - that is, if they want to."

Karras again spoke out with a new suggestion. "It has been two weeks since our last rendezvous with a starbase, which means we have another two weeks left, assuming they haven't received our transmission."

"Have faith, Lieutenant, that is if your people believe in 'it!'" Styles said. The Andorian replied with a slight grin and looked away. After the other officers had listened to what Karras and Styles had said, they carried on where they left off. Captain Styles himself was not at all impressed with their reactions, physical or mental.

There was silence in the Commander's quarters on the alien ship. Sitting quietly in his large chair was Cdr. Tyyle, a hard and ruthless militarist who knew only war as his way of life.

Even the appearance of his room dictated the way he lived, with the bright light emanating from the four corners of his square room, displaying the vast array of weapons of his race, weapons of all shapes and sizes, which covered the wall on one side. On the opposite wall was a large mural decorated in a gold colour, depicting his race in battle with another civilisation very similar to his own but with three pairs of arms.

In many ways his race was similar to the Klingons. They took what they wanted by force, torture and death, driving fear and anger into whoever they approached. They would take hostages as ransom, and even used them for their enjoyment in games of death. Tyyle was the power behind this ship, and he would stop at nothing until he got what he wanted.

Silently Cdr. Tyyle sat facing the large, oval-shaped window, looking out into the cosmos in wonder. Yet he was not aware that there was another presence

in his quarters, in the form of his second in command. Throogue remained motionless and silent behind Tyyle's large chair, hoping that the Commander would hear him as he entered, but it seemed his presence never aroused Tyyle's preoccupied mind, which was concentrated on the light crescent outline of the planet's orange atmosphere which his invisible ship orbited.

"Commander Tyyle!"

Throogue finally decided to break his silence after a minute of standing idle. His first words caught Tyyle's attention. Tyyle suddenly grabbed the armrest on his chair tightly with all four hands in a sudden reflex action. Throogue's own nerves jumped slightly like a static shock from a loose circuit as a result of Tyyle's reaction. Slowly Tyyle turned around in his motor-powered, domineering chair to face Throogue.

"What is the meaning of this intrusion, Sergeant Throogue?" Tyyle said in a tired, low voice.

At first Throogue said nothing, feeling what he had to say was really of no importance. "Commander, you told me to report on any progress with our captives."

"Well, what is there to report, Sergeant?" Tyyle replied sharply.

"The alien captives are reviving."

"Good, good. Bring the Commander to me when he is fully able, and keep an armed guard on him and the others. Is that understood?" Tyyle ordered.

"As you bid, Commander," Throogue replied as he left just as quietly as he had entered.

Tyyle turned his chair to face the window with a sweep of his hand over the light console on his right armrest.

The hold of the ship remained silent with all thirty cubes still positioned as they were, never moving an inch or making a sound. Suddenly in the far corner of the ship's hold, a door appeared. There was no seam to indicate that it was there; it seemed that it appeared just like magic in the wall.

As the door opened, a bright light illuminated a small portion of the ship's hold, casting a wide beam which outshone the dim lighting. Suddenly a large, silhouetted figure appeared in the doorway. The shadow he cast made him look rather fearsome with his four long arms, and his deep, inset head giving him a rather sinister Mr. Hyde appearance. As the alien entered the spacious ship's hold his full features came into light. It was Sergeant Throogue, who was following his orders to the full. Closely tailing him was a small detail of twelve guards, each heavily armed with long, formidable-looking weapons. Each guard was expert in their use, and each would have no hesitation in using them to full advantage if provoked.

In Throogue's upper right hand he held a very small tubular device which didn't look much like a weapon but like a tool of some sort. He held it about four inches away from his small slit-shaped mouth and spoke into it in a language unknown to any Human. The language he spoke sounded like a Klingon talking backwards at a slow speed, but it was enough to show clearly what the device he was holding was - a translator of some kind.

"Hear me, alien prisoners of Sol System. How I am able to talk to you is of no importance, but that I speak to your Commander is." As Throogue spoke his voice was simultaneously transmitted to all the cubes in a more recognisable

language. In each of the cubes all the officers were taken by complete surprise by the echoing sound of Throogue's ultimatum. As they looked instinctively upwards, they wondered where the voice came from, and how it knew where they originated from. Their questions remained unanswered. "If you do not surrender your Commander to us, you will face the consequences of pain and death, which will all come swiftly." There was a sudden silence from Throogue's translator, then suddenly a voice sounded abruptly in his native language.

"This is Captain Styles of the Federation ship the U.S.S. Excelsior. What is it you want from us?" the voice said.

"How can I be sure that you are the true Commander and not his aide?" Throogue sharply questioned, feeling unsure if it was the genuine Commander he was in contact with.

"I wouldn't be so stupid as not to answer, when it is me my crew's lives depend upon!" Styles shouted out from within the cube, wondering if his words were heard.

"A very admirable choice, Commander," Throogue said, pleased, feeling that his plans were coming into action. "I will have you removed from your confinement. Any show of resistance will result in your crew suffering!"

"Understood. There will be no resistance!"

Throogue began to walk down the long rows of cubes, following the signal from his translator to its source.

"Listen here, Bates, I want no provocative action taken. Do you understand?"

"Aye sir," Bates replied.

"And that goes for all of you. I want all of us to come out of this alive and not in bits and pieces!"

"Halt!" Throogue ordered as he reached his goal, standing next to the cube at the far end of the hold. "Arm your weapons! Any sign of resistance, shoot to stun!" Slowly the armed guards encircled Throogue with all guns ready, as he was about to open the cube. With a swift wave of Throogue's hand at the appropriate point on the cube, a small portion seven feet by three disappeared, revealing a very crowded interior.

"Where is your Commander?" Throogue said, speaking into his translator.

Bates stood up and spoke voluntarily. "I am the Commander!"

"You are not!" Throogue replied, knowing the voice sounded different on his translator. At the wave of his hand a guard then stunned Bates with his gun. Bates suddenly collapsed to the floor as a red beam of light smothered his body, then faded away. The other officers felt the urge to attack, but with the alien guns aimed at them, and Styles with his open arms holding them back, they could do nothing.

"Are you the Commander?" Throogue asked, looking at the Human officer holding back his crew.

"Yes, I am, and I want an explanation for your shooting one of my officers!" Styles said in an almost frenzied rage.

"Your officer did not comply with our agreement, so he must be corrected!"

Styles did not reply to Throogue's almost logical statement. Throogue then

pointed to Captain Styles, ordering the guards to take him. Styles still remained silent as he left the cube. As Throogue began to close the door behind him, three other Starfleet officers quickly rushed to the exit before it closed, but they were too late as the wall suddenly appeared solid to their touch, as though the door had never existed. The door was not closed by mechanical means; all the walls appeared the same, made by some form of transmuting the solid wall matter using a highly advanced alien technology, so it was almost impossible for them to escape.

CHAPTER TEN

"Let me reach deep into your mind. Release your thoughts to me. There is nothing to hide. Your mind is with my mind, your thoughts are my thoughts, our minds are one and together."

Saavik felt a small release of energy coming from the patient's body as she continued to keep in physical contact with her. With Saavik's right hand spread evenly across the girl's face, she felt her own mind slowly sinking into the other like a sponge, until she felt as though it was herself in the patient's place.

Kirk and McCoy watched impatiently as Saavik was still in the process of making the mind link with her friend. Kirk thought that the information Saavik could extract would be of more help to their case, but McCoy felt otherwise, knowing that there was always a risk to both Saavik and his patient, having them sharing minds. But McCoy had no choice; it was a now or never situation, as their time was limited.

"Yes," Saavik said softly. "Sonic shower. Nullifying energy effect. Emptiness, alone. Losing control. Suicide! Silence!" Saavik began to close her eyes tightly. Then her fingers slowly released their hold on the patient's face. It was over. But after three seconds Saavik collapsed due to her link. Kirk quickly caught her in his arms before she fell to the ground. Carrying her heavy body, Kirk struggled to keep her up, as he gently tried to ease Saavik onto the opposite bed.

"I'm getting too old for this. I feel like I've strained every muscle in my arms!" Kirk moaned. "Is she all right, Bones?" he went on concernedly. McCoy made a quick check on Saavik's condition using a medical scanner which he removed from his breast pocket. Slowly he waved the small scanner around her head a couple of times, then turned it off and replaced it in his pocket.

"Let's hope so. It looks as though it's exhaustion, due to her mind-meld. Luckily there's no damage to either of them," McCoy said. "I don't want two more bodies on my hands."

"It never happens to Spock when he mind-melds," Kirk pointed out, wondering why it had happened to Saavik.

"Don't forget, Jim, Spock is a male and he has a more trained mind, which makes him stronger, not only physically. As for Saavik, she's young and a little inexperienced."

"I assure you, Bones, it was necessary - but if only she had told us first, you would have been more prepared for the situation," Kirk said defensively.

"It's stubbornness, Jim," McCoy reminded him, "Just like her mentor." Kirk said nothing to his remark, but there was a small smile on his face.

After only a minute of unconsciousness, Saavik's eyes fluttered for a second and then remained open. She was once again back to full consciousness.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?" McCoy asked. "Any dizziness or palpitations?"

"I feel fine now, thank you, Doctor," Saavik replied as she slowly sat up with her legs dangling from the bed, and looking a little dazed and worn out, which she refused to admit. Kirk walked up to her until they were face to face.

"Tell me, Lieutenant, what did you find from the meld?" Kirk said.

Saavik fell silent for a second, placing what she remembered in a simple order of importance and remembrance. "What I extracted, Captain, was rather disordered and confusing."

"Why is that?" Kirk asked curiously.

"I have no logical explanation for her state of mind. From what I recollect she was in the sonic shower when it occurred."

"What occurred?" McCoy asked.

"I think it was some sort of a transporter beam," Saavik answered, stretching her thoughts to a more logical if not a more Human idea. "It seems that when she left her room after her shower, the whole ship was deserted."

"Is it possible that the shower could have some effect on Saavik's transportation theory?" Kirk wondered.

"It sounds credible to me," McCoy said, backing Saavik's idea. "Let's see, you have a sonic shower, and then get suspended in a transporter beam. I wouldn't want to see the results!" The thought of sound waves mingled with Human atoms while they was in transit made McCoy shudder - he would have considered the possibility of it ever occurring in the normal way of things nonexistent.

"What was that you said before, Saavik? A nullifying effect?" Kirk said, reminding Saavik of her meld. "The sonic shower's rays may have had some effect against the alien's beams - rather like a neutraliser, which luckily Lt. Watson was in, which is why she is still with us."

"I share those same thoughts, Captain," Saavik replied to Kirk's comments.

Suddenly the communicator in the wall on the far side of the sickbay sounded with a whistling noise. Kirk quickly went and pressed the intercom switch. "Kirk here!"

Sulu's voice sounded clearly, "We're ready to move, sir."

"We're on our way. Kirk out!"

"What about the rest of the story, Jim?" McCoy exclaimed.

"That can wait until next time, since I heard what I wanted to hear," Kirk said as he was preparing to leave sickbay. "Saavik, I'll need you on the bridge science station - are you well enough?"

"Yes sir!"

"Bones can stay with our sleeping beauty. Call me when she comes around." Kirk left quickly, closely followed by Saavik.

"I'm always left with the boring work," McCoy protested as Kirk left.

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"Bridge!" The turbolift's computer voice sounded as it stopped at the desired level for Kirk. The doors once again opened to reveal the large, spacious bridge as Kirk exited the lift, followed by Saavik, who quickly made her way to the science station. Scott was still there, as was Sulu at the helm.

"Weapons section ready," the young female officer said. Kirk remembered her face as that of the officer who was relieved by Chekov on the Enterprise, but now it seemed as though she'd found a new and better position.

Lt. Hansadu, the Enterprise's Hindu relief navigator, turned to inform Kirk of his situation. "Captain, I've preprogrammed our course matching the Enterprise's coordinates," Hansadu said in his Indian accent.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Kirk commended, as he made his way to the command chair, which looked nothing like the one he was used to. The motion restraints which held its occupant in the chair opened horizontally to enclose the Captain in what seemed like a large, square manacle, whereas the Enterprise's just encircled each leg vertically during an emergency. Kirk slowly eased himself into the chair, feeling rather tense as though he might activate something as a result of sitting in it.

"Mr. Scott?" Kirk called. Scott turned to face the Excelsior's new Captain. Kirk stared at Scott, waiting for an answer.

"She's all yours, sir!" he replied.

"Scotty, signal the Enterprise to tell them we're moving out," Kirk ordered. "And get down to engineering!"

"Aye sir," Scott replied as he made his way to the communications section.

"Mr. Sulu, let's see what this ship can do. Ahead one quarter impulse power!"

"Aye sir, one quarter impulse," Sulu replied to Kirk's order.

Slowly the ship began to move effortlessly, as though it had never been damaged at all, yet it felt as though if they continued any further something unpredictable would surely happen.

"Sir, we're now steady on impulse power," Sulu informed Kirk.

"Remain as we are; we don't want to destroy ourselves when we're just leaving."

"Aye sir," Sulu acknowledged.

Spock was still in the command chair watching the main screen, staring at the myriad stars passing by every second, knowing that within each star system there was life yet to be discovered. Spock knew there was still more he could learn to understand, yet their time was always so limited.

"Mr. Spock," Uhura called out. "Line coming in from the Excelsior. It's Mr. Scott, he says their ship is now operational."

"Tell them we acknowledge their signal," Spock ordered.

"Aye sir, transmitting now," Uhura replied.

"Mr. Spock!" Chekov said. He was closely observing the science station scanner, and had found something of great importance.

"What is it, Mr. Chekov?" Spock asked.

"I seem to have picked up a small ship on the long range scanners. It's about fifteen metres in length, and its configuration closely matches that of the last ship we encountered."

Spock quickly stood up from the command chair and made his way to the science station, feeling that he should see this object for himself, as it might prove to be dangerous. From the information he obtained from the computer, he discovered that this ship was not cloaked as the other vessel was.

"Mr. Chekov, have you calculated its course heading?" Spock asked as he stared in fascination at the scanner, wondering what the ship would do next.

"Aye sir, it's on a direct course ahead of us."

"That is just what I suspected," Spock replied, confirming Chekov's calculations. Swiftly the Vulcan made his way back to the command chair, and as he sat, he gave a direct order to the helm officer. "Helm, take us on a parallel course with the Excelsior and adjust our speed to match hers."

"What good will that do?" Chekov questioned.

"It will give us the advantage over the other vessel. The Excelsior will serve as a second defence line if it should attack. Call it a military manoeuvre."

Chekov quickly looked back at his scanner, after staring at Spock for a minute, wondering at how much he had changed since his refusion with Dr. McCoy. "It should now be within visual range," Chekov reported, wondering what it looked like, rather than just seeing it as a small, red dot on his scanner.

"Helm, increase magnification to factor two," Spock said.

"Aye sir, magnification two."

The main screen began to blur as the image began to increase in size.

"There she is, sir!" exclaimed the young helm officer.

"I am quite capable of seeing for myself, Mister," Spock clearly pointed out in reply to the helmsman's remark.

The ship began to increase gradually in size as it converged on the Enterprise. Its shape was similar to that of their own mark six photon torpedo, but it was over fifteen times as large, and also long, narrow and deadly looking. Its outer hull was heavily encrusted with small pipes and slabs of different sizes and shapes. The ship looked very weathered and battered, with dark brown and grey smudgy streaks. In other words, its overall design was of a very archaic nature.

"Your opinion, Mr. Chekov?" Spock asked the Russian officer, who was quite well versed in various ship designs and purposes.

"It looks rather like a small scout ship of some kind, very old and pitted," Chekov replied, applying what knowledge he could to the ship.

"I am inclined to agree with you," Spock replied.

"From its condition I'd say it had been in a battle," Chekov added.

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On the Excelsior Saavik too picked up the same signal as Chekov did, and also knowing its precise destination, informed Kirk of the situation.

"Have they scanned us?" Kirk asked.

"Negative, Captain," Saavik replied.

"The Enterprise must have already picked it up on her scanners," Kirk said knowingly.

"Sir, line coming in from the Enterprise - it's from Mr. Spock," informed Saavik, taking the incoming message from the communications console, as it began to bleep rapidly like a tricorder on overload. Kirk quickly left his chair to head for the communications console.

"I'll take it from here," Kirk said to Saavik, relieving her position for the time being. Saavik swiftly made her way back to her original post, and continued to watch the alien ship's approach on her scanner.

"Kirk here. Did you pick up that vessel heading your way, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain, it should intercept us in approximately twenty five point four minutes if we continue at our present speed."

"What do you make of it, Spock?" Kirk said.

"It appears to be a scout class vessel of some kind. Its origin is the same as that of the ship that attacked both us and the Excelsior. Its design looks primitive and inadequate for interstellar travel." The information Spock fed to Kirk seemed to be more than he required on technology, but it wasn't enough about its purpose.

"How about number of crew?"

"Our scanners are unable to penetrate its internal structure. They seem to be using some type of screen which renders our scanners useless." Spock had nothing further to add at this point.

"From what Saavik has just picked up, it appears that craft isn't even cloaked," Kirk bluntly pointed out, knowing that it was strange.

"I believe that it wants us to see it. It may have an ultimatum for us." Spock's words made Kirk feel less tense, knowing that this might be the only chance to make actual physical contact with a new, alien race.

"Have you assumed a course heading parallel with us, Spock?"

"It's already been done, Captain."

"Good, we'll try and keep it between us; that will give us the advantage. Kirk out!" Kirk began to move back to the centre seat, but even before he could sit down, Saavik once again interrupted with more new information.

"Captain, the vessel has stopped moving," Saavik said, monitoring it on her scanners.

"Have they scanned us yet?" Kirk asked, feeling that their plan might not work.

"Yes, they have, sir," Saavik replied with the bad news.

"Damn!" Kirk cursed. This meant a change in plan.

Suddenly the main viewing screens on both the Excelsior and the Enterprise began to blur with static.

"Captain, we have some kind of interference on the monitor," Sulu said, trying to clear the screen. Pressing every switch and knob he could find in relation to the monitor had no effect whatsoever. Simultaneously the screen on the Enterprise presented the same annoying picture. Bit by bit the white, horizontal flakes fluttered about the whole screen, multiplying in their thousands every second, until there were no black patches of space left showing. Then suddenly the picture cleared, until it was filled with a large domineering face and the bulging muscled shoulders of an alien.

"Greetings, Captain Kirk!" The alien spoke in a low-pitched voice. "Unknown to you, we have been monitoring your communications with your First Officer Mr. Spock. Your plans of deception will not succeed with us!" The alien's tone of voice sounded so serious that Kirk realised the aliens would actually destroy themselves in order to succeed. They must succeed, no matter what the cost was.

Kirk slowly moved towards Sulu. Each step he took was a calculated move, until he was right behind Sulu's chair. Kirk suddenly turned to Saavik, expecting her to make a study of them, using the scanners in every possible way.

"Your scanners will not operate. We have ways to neutralise them," the alien said. At that point Saavik ceased any attempt to use the scanners, knowing what they said was true.

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise. Identify yourself and your intentions!"

"I am Sergeant Throogue of the battle command ship Amari. It has taken us time to understand your language without the use of a translator. All you need do is listen. Any hostile actions against us will be futile." Kirk waited impatiently for his question to be answered fully. "Our intentions are simple. All you need do is take us to one of your dilithium mining planets."

"Why do you want us to do that?" Kirk asked, knowing that he could not obey.

"We Emarici conquer what we can find, and these new stones you call dilithium serve as a great power source for our own weapons and ships, as they do for you."

"And if we refuse to meet your demands?" Kirk asked, knowing that to give them what they wanted was totally impossible, no matter the cost, as it would cause a major incident throughout the Federation.

"We will execute the whole crew of the ship you now inhabit!" Throogue's words sparked a flame in Kirk's mind, making him feel he had no choice. Not only that, Kirk was at a great disadvantage. The Emarici vessel had over five hundred Starfleet officers held prisoner, and with the mother ship well cloaked, they could have been anywhere in the system, which made finding it like finding a needle in an endless haystack.

"If we do agree?" Kirk asked, feeling that he needed to know both sides of the bargain to make the best logical choice. The future of the Federation was now in his hands.

Throogue then gave Kirk's alternative choice. "Your comrades will be freed on a habitable planet of our choice." Kirk began to rub his chin, thinking what he should do.

"You must give us time to consider your ultimatum," he said.

"I give you one thousand nictus, which is one hour of your Earth time,"

Throogue replied, then suddenly the face disappeared and the main screen reverted to its usual picture of space.

For a moment Kirk thought hard, wondering what type of plan he could use, but for the moment only one logical suggestion came to his mind. "Saavik, send in code to Enterprise, ask Mr. Spock to meet me here on the Excelsior."

"Aye sir, coding now," Saavik replied without hesitation.

On the Enterprise bridge the atmosphere was one of great tension for the many new officers, as they had never come face to face with a new alien race before. But for the veterans of space it was just another power hungry race demanding the impossible with the threat of too great odds.

Suddenly Uhura called out through the voices of the bridge officers who were discussing the matter in hand. "Mr. Spock!"

"Gentlemen!" Spock ordered sharply. "Could you discuss this matter in another place and time and not while we are in a major predicament!" The officers quietened down, allowing Uhura to be heard. "That's much better," Spock continued. "Yes, Lt. Uhura, you were about to report?"

"Sir, message coming in from the Excelsior in code."

Spock silently moved out of the command chair towards Uhura's station to read Kirk's scrambled message. "Understood, Captain," Spock said, even though he knew Kirk couldn't hear him. Standing erect, Spock stared piercingly at Mr. Chekov who was seated silently at the weapons station. "Mr. Chekov!"

"Yes sir!" Chekov replied as he turned to face Spock.

"You have command!"

"Aye sir!"

Kirk waited patiently in the Excelsior transporter room for Mr. Spock's arrival. Looking around the boring taupe coloured room, the first thing that took his notice was its immense size. Twice the size of the Enterprise's, and having twelve instead of the normal six transporter pads, this meant she could transport twice the number of officers in one go, which was its main advantage over his own ship. But Kirk wasn't at all bothered about size. The bigger they are the harder they fall, had always been Kirk's long-standing motto. In the case of the Excelsior, the larger it was the harder it was to repair, and that was one thing he hoped he would never have to do.

Suddenly one of the transporter pad lights began to fluctuate every five seconds. A soft, shimmering, blue light appeared. Hovering in midair, the light increased, not only in brightness but also in size, until it reached both the roof and floor pads, creating a harsh blue pillar of light. In its centre a faded humanoid outline slowly appeared, getting more solid as the seconds passed by. As the figure became totally solid the light faded away, until it revealed Mr. Spock.

After the transition was completed, Spock calmly removed himself from the platform and onto the base level where Kirk was standing.

"Welcome aboard the U.S.S. Excelsior, Mr. Spock," Kirk greeted his First Officer.

"Thank you, Captain," Spock replied, turning his head to look around. "A very impressive ship!" he remarked, as he made a quick study of the transporter

room.

"It's the Federation's only experimental ship, Spock. Just wait 'til you see how they redesigned the bridge," replied Kirk. Followed closely by Spock, he left the transporter room and headed in the direction of sickbay. "Spock, did you receive the alien transmission on the Enterprise screen?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, we did, Captain," Spock replied. "They seem to be a very warlike species, very reminiscent of the Romulans."

Walking down the large, open corridors which were almost as silent as space itself, Kirk and Spock made their way to the turbolift. As the doors parted with a sharp hiss, Kirk entered first and was followed by Spock.

"Level please," said the baritone voice of the lift computer as it waited for Kirk to respond with a direction.

"Sickbay," Kirk replied. With great smoothness the lift carried out the order promptly, moving silently at high speed through the ship's internal structure towards its destination. Even Spock appreciated the smooth ride as he saw its course projected on a small screen on the wall opposite the door in yellow lights on a black background. Though he saw them turn corners on the screen, their journey felt as though it was one long straight trip. Suddenly the lift stopped and the annoying voice of the computer spoke once again.

"Sickbay level." The doors opened to a corridor similar to the one they had just left, except for the information insignia on the wall in front of them which indicated four directions, as opposed to the two they'd seen before. Trying to follow from what he remembered, Kirk continued to lead the way, passing points of interest which he recalled until the corridor reached a dead end.

"Where did I go wrong?" Kirk thought out loud.

"I believe there must be a turning we missed back there," Spock said, trying to aid Kirk's memory. This time Spock led the way, even though it was his first time on the Excelsior, putting his logic into action. After a minute and a half of searching, a small sign took Kirk's notice.

"This way, Spock!" Kirk called out to the Vulcan, who was still walking ahead of him. "I think I've found it."

"If I had calculated my course and direction faster, I believe it would have led me to this point," Spock replied as he made the short journey back to the Human. As Kirk, followed by Spock, turned the first left corner, they finally arrived at the sickbay area.

The doors opened to reveal a very stark looking interior. The office area of the sickbay was empty so Kirk made his way to the surgery, hoping that McCoy would still be there, watching over his sleeping patient. Entering through the surgery doors, Kirk found McCoy still sitting in the same place where he had left him before going to the bridge.

"Any progress, Bones?" Kirk said to McCoy, who looked as though he was half asleep.

With a quick reaction to Kirk's first words, McCoy bounced to life as his head suddenly jerked upwards.

"Oh, it's you, Jim," he said, looking half dazed. "No, there's still been no response, physical or otherwise. She's still as we found her."

"I suppose you've been pumping more of your obnoxious potions and concoctions into her, Doctor!" Spock said in a humorous tone of voice, taking

McCoy's attention as he came walking around the corner to face the good doctor.

"To be truthful, Spock, I haven't!" McCoy blurted out. "Why is it, Spock, that whenever I have a patient, you come to the conclusion that I am always performing unnecessary experiments on them?"

"I was not trying to judge your morality, Doctor, but the way you perform your examinations sometimes looks rather archaic," Spock said, referring to the way McCoy carried out his medical duties.

"Do you have any suggestions, then? Don't answer that!" McCoy said quickly, trying not to let Spock get the better of him this time around.

"Jim," Spock said, trying to break free from McCoy's annoying conversation, "our only solution to this alien crisis is for us to agree with them."

McCoy was taken by surprise at Spock's reaction to the Emarici incident. "Are you out of your Vulcan mind?" he shot out in protest at Spock's idea. "It would put the whole Federation into chaos. We'll have the whole galaxy on our necks if we do!"

Spock raised his left eyebrow in reaction to McCoy's last sarcastic remark.

"Hold it down, Bones, I think I know what Spock is getting at," Kirk said, speculating on Spock's idea.

"Jim, come to your senses! Do you know what you're leading us into?" McCoy said, not believing what his ears heard from Kirk.

"Yes I do, Bones!" Kirk exclaimed. "A trap for them. We lead them to a dilithium mining planet, then we try to overcome them, which means direct contact with their commander. If I could just get to him we would have the first advantage."

"The only planet within range of us is Delta Vega, which is a two day journey at maximum warp speed," Spock said, reluctantly picking the only planet which was a logical distance away. He knew that it would affect Kirk personally as it was the last of all the planets he wanted to revisit, since one of his best friends, Gary Mitchell, had been killed there by Kirk's own hand. Kirk even thought to himself that if he ever visited Delta Vega, Mitchell's ghost would haunt him.

"Is there another planet besides that, Spock?" Kirk asked, knowing himself that there wasn't.

"I'm sorry, Jim, that is my only logical suggestion," Spock said quietly - almost gently.

"Doctor?" Kirk softly asked, waiting for McCoy to make his own decision.

"Spock's right, Jim; that planet's our only hope of ending this crisis, if we play our cards right." McCoy's words finally put Kirk's mind to rest. The choice had been made, and it was now Kirk's word for the go-ahead.

"Spock, how far did you say it was?" Kirk asked, to be once again reminded of the journey time; hoping that he could make the most of it.

"Two days, Jim, at maximum warp," Spock replied.

Kirk suddenly stood up. "Set Enterprise's course for Delta Vega!"

"And the Excelsior, Captain?" Spock asked in a more formal tone.

"We'll tow her on tractor beam since she's lost her warp capabilities," Kirk answered.

"With use of the tractor beam, our warp capabilities will be slightly reduced due to lack of thrust power, which will be converted to energy drag, as one third of the ship's power will tow the Excelsior. If calculated travelling at warp five point eight, our time duration should be approximately two and a half days, give or take a few hours."

"Is that so, Spock?" McCoy said, feeling very annoyed by the way Spock calculated his every move like a super computer.

"I believe I've said all that is necessary, Doctor," Spock replied coolly, putting his logical mind to rest. McCoy mentally praised God for letting Spock finish.

"I'll go tell Scotty the news personally - and Spock, meet me in the transporter room in ten minutes," Kirk said before leaving the room.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Enterprise transporter shone brightly, lighting up the whole room with a bright, pale blue light, casting deep shadows where two transporter officers stood waiting, as two tall figures materialised molecule by molecule on the pads, the forms of Captain Kirk and his Science Officer, Mr. Spock.

"Dr. McCoy and Lt. Saavik will be over shortly with a casualty. Prepare for their needs," Kirk ordered the two transporter officers.

"Aye sir!" replied one of the officers, but then, needing to question the Captain on the other officers' whereabouts, "What of Mr. Scott and the others, sir?"

"Give them time; they're still repairing the ship," Kirk replied.

"Aye sir," replied the questioning officer as Kirk and Spock left the room. Making his way to the turbolift through the narrow corridors, Kirk could see the great difference in size compared to the Excelsior. If all ships were as large as the Excelsior, cramped conditions would be unheard of, but still, that was a long way off. Kirk entered the turbolift, followed by Spock.

After a minute of travelling in the turbolift, Kirk and Spock emerged from the car onto the bridge. When Chekov saw the Captain he immediately rose from the chair to allow Kirk to take his rightful place.

"Any response from that Emarici ship yet?" Kirk asked Chekov impatiently.

"Negative, Captain, just as before. No response at all," Chekov replied quickly.

Spock, who was already seated at the science station, began to inform Kirk of their status. "Captain, we are being scanned. I'm picking up small amounts of feedback coming from their ship."

"So they're eavesdropping now, are they?" Kirk could feel in his mind the aliens' suspicion growing with every minute that passed by. *Are these aliens worth trusting? If we lead them to a planet, will they turn tail and kill the hostages? How do I know their five hundred hostages are still alive? For all I know they could already be dead, and what I have planned could all be for nothing. No! It wouldn't all be for nothing. We would have saved our power resources for the Federation.* Kirk spoke again, this time to Spock.

"Spock, how long have we got before they make contact with us again?"

"Seven minutes, forty seconds, Captain," Spock replied, taking note of the science station chronometer's exact time.

"Seven minutes," Kirk said gloomily. "It seems we'll have to wait for them to move first."

The bridge portside turbolift doors opened with a hiss like a gas escaping from a high pressure canister. Dr. McCoy entered the bridge, looking around at the other officers who were hard at work preparing for the inevitable. McCoy made his way to the centre seat which was already occupied by Captain Kirk. Seeing McCoy's shadow, but not knowing who it was, Kirk instinctively turned in his chair; he could guess who it was, knowing that McCoy always stood on that same spot next to him. His suspicions were correct.

"Why Bones, glad to see you back aboard already," Kirk said.

"I just got back from making a full examination of our patient," McCoy said, presenting his report. "She should be out of it in a few hours, once we finish cleaning out her system."

"Where's Saavik?" Kirk said.

"She's still with the patient," McCoy answered.

"This is no time for sentimental class reunions." Kirk thought for a moment of Saavik's emotional actions. "You know, Bones, I've never seen her show her feelings much up to now."

"Don't forget, Jim, she is part Romulan and they like to indulge in emotions," McCoy reminded him.

"Anyway, Bones, it's no excuse for missing out on duty. She can't have forgotten our situation," Kirk said.

Overhearing Kirk and McCoy's quiet conversation with his exceptionally acute hearing, Spock turned his chair to face the Captain. "If you wish, I'll see to the Lieutenant, since she is in my department."

"No, it's all right, Spock, she's helping McCoy," Kirk said, not wanting Spock to leave his post when he might be needed. Spock understood, and said nothing further, knowing that he would be needed during the coming crisis. Silently he returned to his working position.

Kirk swung round to his old position, staring at the screen. Then suddenly he remembered his present situation. "Time, Spock?" he asked impatiently, waiting for Spock to answer.

Spock quickly turned to face Kirk, ready to give the answer. "Two minutes, twenty seconds, from my mark," he said, after a quick glance at his chronometer.

Suddenly a quick random-sounding bleeping noise emanated from the control panel on Kirk's chair. Kirk swiftly pressed the switch that produced the sound. "Yes?"

"Captain, all the rest of our crew are back from the Excelsior," reported the transporter operator. Kirk felt glad to have a full ship's complement again, as he'd felt rather uneasy being separated from some of his most experienced officers who had helped him through tight spots many times in the past.

"Good. Tell Mr. Sulu to report to the bridge immediately. Kirk out."

Spock suddenly took note of the screen while Kirk was still occupied finishing his communication with the transporter officer. McCoy's eyes popped open as he too stared at the screen in awe, but he was not quick enough to speak out, feeling paralysed with shock.

"Captain, the screen!" Spock said, catching the other officers' attention at the same time. Kirk looked up and was again taken by surprise at seeing the face of an Emarici war officer. The bald headed officer looked sharply at Kirk, as though he could feel his thoughts, and then began to speak in his low, unforgettable voice once again.

"Captain Kirk, your time has run out. Make your choice!" Throogue said.

Kirk turned to his Science Officer, waiting for the final go-ahead. Spock nodded in agreement.

"We accept your conditions. But you must make the prisoner exchange on the planet we find for you," Kirk demanded, trying to put his plan into action, and also feeling that if this didn't work, what would?

"I must confer with my commander on the mother ship," Throogue replied.

"This is it, Spock," Kirk said quietly. Knowing what was expected of him, Spock tried to trace any message leaving the alien ship. "Anything, Spock?" Kirk patiently asked the working Vulcan.

"A signal carried on a short wave band... but it may take time to decipher the language and pinpoint the intended destination," Spock replied.

Suddenly Throogue turned back to face Kirk on his monitor screen, ready to give his reply. "We accept. But you, Captain James T. Kirk, will travel with us unarmed, and we will in turn send one of our officers to your vessel, as insurance."

Kirk slowly turned to Spock, who replied with a blank, emotionless stare, then towards the very emotional Dr. McCoy, whose only priority was the health of the crew and his Captain.

"Jim, think about what you're doing," McCoy said softly, trying not to let his words become audible on the ship to ship speaker.

Kirk turned back to the screen, taking in what McCoy said but not taking it to heart. He felt that what he would say in reply to the alien would hurt McCoy, not in the way of trust but in their close friendship. He had no trust in this alien, but it had to be done for the sake of his crew and the Federation.

"I accept. I'll prepare to beam aboard, and you do likewise!" Kirk looked quickly at McCoy, who looked sourly back but said nothing in protest in front of the aliens. Just as quickly as the large picture of Throogue had appeared, it disappeared. Kirk couldn't bear to see McCoy's troubled face, but he had no choice, seeing that he had to face his problems to the full, otherwise it would never be resolved.

"Jim, are you crazy? You don't know what they'll do!" McCoy protested. Even Spock could see the fiery spark in McCoy's piercing eyes as he continued to growl at his Captain. Kirk's face dropped slightly at McCoy's outspoken remark, and he thought, *Why do I have to give this misery to a close friend like McCoy?*

"Listen, Bones," Kirk said, letting everyone on the bridge listen in to the argument. "The lives of the other crew, and the wealth of the Federation mining are of paramount importance - personal, petty squabbles have no position in a 'no win' situation!"

"Have you considered the possibility of deception on their part, Captain?" Spock said, butting in. "If you beam over first, that will give them the edge over us; they will have you. As we already know, Jim, the odds are already in their favour. Should we not try to balance those odds to our side?" Spock was aware of a premonition.

"Quite right, Spock, quite right," Kirk replied, agreeing with what Spock was thinking. Once again he looked at McCoy, who made no comment on what Spock had suggested.

"Jim, just say you make it alive to that ship, what will you do?" McCoy asked.

Kirk stared at his close friend. "I don't really know yet," he replied, unsure of himself. "Transporter room, prepare for beam out!" he added as he pressed one of the many switches on his chair console. Kirk then turned to Spock who sat silently in his chair, listening to the harsh exchange of words.

"Jim, we will need to keep close track of your movements on their vessel during your journey."

"Right, Spock! A concealed transmitter on a long range frequency, just in case they get too far away," Kirk said, agreeing with Spock's very helpful suggestion.

"Your Starfleet insignia, Jim, seems to be a logical position, provided you do not remove your tunic." Spock pointed directly at Kirk's tunic; McCoy also stared carefully at the insignia.

"I'll begin adjusting the transmitter to your voice and heartbeat signal right away." Carefully, McCoy began to remove the insignia from Kirk's chest, trying not to ruin his tunic in the process. "Jim, try not to let it get caught on anything, will you? This is our only lifeline to you."

Only the low humming noise of the transporter system could be heard as the transporter officer finally finished feeding the co-ordinates into the computer as ordered by Captain Kirk. Waiting silently for the Captain's entry, the elderly officer who was alone at the transporter controls began to hum the first tune he could think of to pass the time away in this bland and dull looking room. He also began to tap his fingers rhythmically on the edge of the console to add a little instrumentation to his hummed song, and hoped that the Captain would arrive soon and thus relieve him of his transporter duty until further notice. After four minutes of waiting, the doors of the transporter room suddenly opened and Captain Kirk came in, closely followed by his doctor and his First Officer.

"Have the co-ordinates been set?" Kirk asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the transporter officer.

"Jim, remember what I said," McCoy reminded him.

"I know, Bones," Kirk replied as he quickly made his way to the transporter pads.

"Be careful, Jim," Spock added.

"Spock, Bones, it's me, Jim," Kirk said softly, knowing that his two best friends felt concerned. "Energise!" he added. As the officer at the transporter console slowly pushed the matter gain sliders downwards, Kirk's tall form gradually began to fade away as his body was engulfed in a pillar of blue and

white light; he was gone!

"Well, I hope he finds what he wants to find in one piece!" McCoy said to Spock as he turned to the door.

"Who are you referring to, Doctor, the Captain or the missing crew?" Spock curiously questioned McCoy's statement.

McCoy suddenly stopped as the doors parted, and quickly faced Spock to answer his question. "Both, Spock, both," he replied, and departed in an unnecessary rush down the corridor, leaving Spock to ponder on his last words.

Suddenly the transporter officer spoke out. "Sir, a signal is locking in from the Captain's destination."

"Call in an armed security detail. This must be our alien opponent beaming in," Spock said.

"Security detail to the transporter room on the double!" the transporter officer ordered into the comlink.

Slowly a shimmering, harsh, green light appeared on the transporter pad from which Kirk had left. A green, fuzzy silhouette of the large alien appeared, becoming more solidly detailed as every second passed. As the effects of the transporter beam wore away the alien became solid living matter. Already positioned in each of the slender brown hands was a small silver rod with a round white orb attached to the ends facing the Humans. Were they weapons of a highly advanced design, or were they tokens of friendship? Spock wondered.

Suddenly the doors opened and a security detail of three armed officers entered in response to Spock's orders. The moment the three officers turned to point their phasers at the alien, its response was sudden and swift. The objects the alien carried emitted a bright blue phaser-like beam at the three security officers, vapourising their bodies into nothingness, leaving no residue; it was as though they had never existed.

"Fascinating," Spock said silently to himself, hoping he could make a closer examination of the alien's weapon. Slowly and silently he came out from behind the console to face the alien. As Spock came out into the open he had both hands raised slightly to show he was unarmed. Gradually he came to a halt about a metre away from the alien and gazed at him curiously.

"If you are able to communicate on our level, I am First Officer Spock," Spock said. "How may I address you?"

The alien, who was two feet taller than Spock, looked down on the Vulcan as though he was a harmless creature of little importance. Spock could feel that he was being closely examined from all angles, physically and mentally, hoping that his next action would not be a hostile move.

Suddenly the alien spoke in a slow, low sounding voice. "I am Throogue, Second High of the Emarici ship Amari. If I am harmed in any way, your Captain shall forfeit his life."

"It is best for you to hand over your weapons," Spock advised, "since our Captain's life hangs in the balance."

"I do not trust your kind," replied Throogue. Spock tried to make a grab for the raised weapons but Throogue resisted with a single shake of his guns, showing that he intended to fire if provoked further.

"If you do not intend to release your weapons to us, it is best that you holster them, to prevent any provocative action by our crew," Spock advised.

Still looking offensively towards Spock, Throogue slowly holstered his weapons into four small pockets around his waist while keeping his eyes trained on both Spock and the transporter operator. "Show me around your vessel. I wish to know more about your race," Throogue asked, but it was more like an order.

"Mr. Hingly, order Mr. Scott to the transporter room," Spock immediately responded.

"Remember, any form of deception results in death!"

Spock said nothing in reply, but just raised his left eyebrow. After a minute, while they waited and talked, Scott entered the transporter room, looking rather annoyed at Spock for disturbing his work.

"Mr. Spock, what could be more important than - ?"

Spock pointed Scott towards the large alien officer; Scott was lost for words at the sight of him.

"Mr. Scott, this is our Emarici visitor, Officer Throogue. Could you show him around the ship, since you are better versed than any other officer?"

"Oh my God! But Mr. Spock..." Scott protested.

"That is an order," Spock said, knowing that he didn't want to do it.

"Aye sir," Scott finally replied.

"Very good, Mr. Scott," Spock said. "Officer Throogue, our engineer will show you around this vessel; you must trust him." Scott felt the heat rushing to his face as his nerves began to jangle. How could Spock do this to him when the ship's condition hung in the balance? *Maybe Spock has a good reason for this alien's stay on the ship,* Scott thought.

As the alien left silently, following the ship's Chief Engineer, Spock received an urgent message from the bridge. Spock opened a channel and replied to the message, which was definitely not good news at all; it was just as he had prophesied.

Kirk materialised in a large, spacious corridor on an alien ship, but knowing what he'd seen of the Emarici ship from the bridge of the Enterprise, it was not the same vessel. Seeing the size of the ship's interior, Kirk knew that he was on a different ship altogether.

Slowly he turned around, examining the environment as he did so. Noticing that he was standing in the middle of a deep yellow coloured corridor junction, which had a round door at each wing, Kirk silently made his way down one of the long passages, hoping it would lead him to an important area. The only sounds that could be heard were his own footsteps, and a low humming noise which seemed to emanate from all around him, remaining at a constant tone wherever he moved.

Walking down one of the passages, he noticed the odd triangular shaped lines on the walls. *Are these doors as well?* Kirk wondered. Still walking on he came to another one, but instead of continuing on he stopped to investigate. Putting his ear almost to the wall, Kirk could hear nothing, which meant he could continue looking for a mechanism to open it - if it was a door, that was. Placing his hands against its cold, smooth surface, Kirk began to feel around the lines and deep grooves of the wall in hope that something would happen. There was no reaction.

Suddenly a sky-blue coloured light began to flash on the perimeter of the

round door. Kirk reacted to it by running back to the side wall of the corridor junction. He began to look around at the other three wings from his position to make sure he was in the clear. Yes, he was safe for now. Kirk concentrated on the glowing door from a safe distance; it was now beginning to open, a small aperture which gradually increased in diameter. When the door was fully open, two Emarici guards walked out. *Right race, wrong ship...or is it?* Kirk thought.

Luckily the two armed guards stopped at the point where Kirk was exploring. Kirk's eyes were now fully concentrating on how they would enter the triangular door. What he noticed was that one of the guards placed all four hands in the centre of the door parallel to the centre line, which then parted like the doors on his own ship. Both guards entered, then the doors closed behind them.

"So that's how they do it," Kirk said to himself. Suddenly he felt a sharp prod in his back. He turned around only to find that he had been captured by two heavily armed guards. "Oh sh...!"

Ship's log: First Officer Spock reporting.

Since our Captain's departure the scanner's signal, specially modified by our ship's surgeon to the Captain's heartbeat, has been totally lost. It is my theory that when we tried to transport the Captain to the Emarici ship's coordinates, they instantly created a complex transporter bridge which diverted him to a point elsewhere that is unknown to us. It seems that they have deceived us, which means we must double our efforts in order to save our Captain, and to complete this mission successfully.

Mr. Scott, our Chief Engineer, is still in the process of showing our Emarici guest around the ship, which will give us time to plan the alien's disarm-ament, and also how to gain his knowledge of our Captain's actual position.

"Mr. Spock, the Emarici scout vessel is moving out of our range," Saavik reported.

"Mr. Sulu, take us forward slowly at one quarter impulse power," ordered Spock. The Enterprise began to ease her way forward with the Excelsior in tow, towards the other vessel which was moving away.

"Mr. Spock, Mr. Scott's engineering assistant reports he is en route to the bridge with the alien," Uhura reported from her console.

"Lt. Saavik," Spock called.

"Yes sir," Saavik replied, as she turned to face him.

"Can you prepare a single circuit line to the engineering section which can be controlled from where you are? I want you to plant a live charge to the console plates which will instantly stun any person touching it."

"How can you be sure that it will stun the alien?" Saavik quickly asked.

"I analysed his composition as he beamed aboard, which showed we only need enough energy to stun a Vulcan, approximately one hundred and twenty five point four volts." He also knew that it was more than enough to kill a Human instantly, a risk he had to take.

Saavik widened her eyes at Spock's last statement, and then proceeded with her task.

After about two minutes the job was completed, by which time the bridge doors were parting to admit Mr. Scott followed by Throogue, the Emarici officer. For Saavik it was a close shave.

"And this is the main bridge, from which everything is controlled," Mr. Scott told Throogue.

"A very impressive ship, yet primitive," Throogue replied as he made a close inspection of the computers near to him. Spock looked at Mr. Scott to see how he took the comment. The expression on Scott's face reflected his emotions very clearly; he looked as though he could kill the alien where he stood.

"And what is it like on your ship, Mr. Throogue?" said Scott sharply in response to Throogue's remark.

"Our command centre is by far superior to yours. We do not make use of simple mechanical switches which are prone to constant wear; instead we use what we know as a sense control system, which uses no mechanics."

"A fascinating concept," Spock replied, while Throogue was looking around the communications section, slowly edging his way to the engineering section.

Spock was now concentrating on Scott, following the engineer's every move as he continued to show the Emarici officer around. Scott was explaining the engineering console, urging Throogue not to touch it. The question in Spock's mind was, would Scott recognise the alteration in time, as he was nearing the booby trapped system. Scott suddenly noticed that there was a small, blue switch left open on the engineering console. As he was about to touch it he noticed most of the officers looking at him sharply, while Sulu gave a slight shake of the head. Scott drew his hand away from the open switch. Luckily, Throogue did not notice the engineer's actions, or any of the other officers' facial responses.

"This is where the engines are monitored," Scott said happily. At that moment Spock's eyes were trained on Saavik's right hand, which rested lightly on a small, red switch. She concentrated on Spock, waiting for him to give the go-ahead nod, which would require speed on her part.

"Are the whole ship's engines relayed from here?" Throogue said.

"Not all systems can be run from here," replied Spock, "as some things are not fully automated. Would you like to try a sample view, just by pressing that blue switch which will display the ship's status?" Most of the officers stopped for a moment to see what was going to happen next. Saavik's hand was at the ready to throw the switch. Throogue's finger was now touching the switch, but it wasn't enough for the effect; suddenly his left hand rested on the console plate.

Spock gave a positive nod towards Saavik, who instantly responded with a push of her finger on the switch, which suddenly sent a high voltage line onto the engineering console and into the Emarici officer, who instantly gave out a high-pitched scream. As sparks blew outwards from the console over the alien, nearby officers quickly shielded their eyes from the effect's bright lights which rained over them.

"You may switch off now, Lieutenant, that will be sufficient," Spock said loudly over the alien's scream. As Saavik turned off the switch all the bridge officers' attention was on the alien, who was now silent yet still standing. "Fascinating," Spock said, referring to the alien's resistance to pain.

It could be plainly seen that the alien was greatly affected by the electrical charge, by the way he struggled with great difficulty to pull out all four guns.

Slowly Throogue turned towards Spock. "You chiru.gr....!" cursed Throogue, all his guns aimed at Spock, who remained cool and unperturbed; then suddenly he collapsed, dropping all four guns in the process.

"A most illogical statement," Spock said, which made the rest of the crew laugh at his reaction.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kirk was held tight with both arms behind his back by two large Emarici guards. The Human made no attempt to struggle because he saw it would have achieved nothing.

Finally, after walking down metres of corridors which all looked remarkably similar, the guards came to a halt in front of one large, round door, which automatically opened for them. On entering, Kirk could feel the barbaric atmosphere around him; to his right, the walls were covered with unusual weapons and a warlike mural decorated the left wall. Indeed, this race looked as cruel and violent as the Klingons, maybe even worse. The room's dark lighting gave a sinister feel to the space around him. With the large, black, rectangular table, and the back of the chair facing him, Kirk knew someone was expecting him.

"I have been awaiting your arrival, Captain James T. Kirk of the starship U.S.S. Enterprise," said the figure in the large chair, which was now beginning to turn around.

"Not a very impressive entrance, since I've been through this many times," Kirk said tiredly.

Slowly the large shadow stood up until his figure came into the dull lighting. "Forgive me, Captain, I am Commander Tyyle of this battle command ship Amari," said the Emarici officer. "Your presence here enlightens me greatly." Tyyle looked to one of his own officers. "You may release our guest, and also bring the other Earthling commander to my presence again."

"Yours is superior," replied the Emarici officer who immediately released Kirk and left, leaving him with the other guard who towered over him from behind.

"So you shanghaied me here, leaving my First Officer to guide the other ship to the mining planet, letting them think that I'm still on your scout ship going on that journey. What else have you planned for us?" Kirk said with a restless tone.

"In addition to the resources we need, we wish to study you Earthlings closely - as in how you would respond to pain and such matters."

"And after you have finished with us, what will you do?" Kirk asked.

"You will all be our mining slaves for eternity," replied Tyyle with a sharp grin on his round face.

"What if we choose to defy you?"

"Then you will all be exterminated!"

"Well at least it sounds better than eternal captivity by overbearing dictators with delusions of godhood, who never understand the things they see, but to destroy or maim!" Kirk said sarcastically. Tyyle couldn't understand the words, but understood the bitter tone.

Tyyle remained silent until the doors ahead of him parted, and Captain

Styles entered with his arms held behind his back by the same guard Kirk had had the painful pleasure of meeting earlier.

"Ah... Captain Styles, how good to see you again!" Tyyle said as Styles came fully into the room. The guard positioned Styles right next to Kirk, so that Tyyle could see them both.

"Amazing," Styles said. "They even managed to capture the legendary Kirk!"

"We will use a mind probe on you two, so that we can learn more about you and see if your kind is worth considering," Tyyle said sharply. "Thovia, are we in position to intercept our scout craft?"

"Yes, master, we have just arrived, and we are on our final approach pattern. The Earth ship is close to our scout ship," replied one of the guards. "Also our officers are talking of wanting recreation, as we've been travelling so long and we are exhausted."

"What, you insolent upstart!" Thovia instantly coiled his upper arms around his head in reaction to Tyyle's unpredictable verbal attack. "No wait, I have a better idea!" Tyyle continued.

"What could that be, master?" said Thovia in wonder as he slowly dropped his arms back to his sides.

"For our crew's enjoyment, our Earth Captains will fight to the death on the planet you call Delta Vega."

"I'll wager you, Tyyle," Kirk said, hoping that it would give him a chance to think of a plan.

"What will you wager me?" Tyyle said with a humorous tone. "I think you are in no position to wager."

"My ship is not under your control yet, and I doubt that it will ever be since my crew is loyal only to me," Kirk pointed out, hoping to increase his chances of success by stalemating his opponent.

"You forget, Captain, I have you to bargain for; surely they are willing to bargain for the life of their dear Captain?" Tyyle spoke softly, trying to create humour from death. "Oh yes....I also have Captain Styles and his whole crew in my grasp - that further increases the odds in my favour."

Styles turned aside to face Kirk, but said nothing. Kirk could feel his chances slipping in Tyyle's favour but he had one card left up his sleeve which he hesitated to use, but it seemed to be his only chance.

"If my ship's officers have not heard from me within two hours they have orders to self-destruct, taking not only your scout ship, but this ship and the entire space sector along with it, using a device called Genesis!"

Styles blurted out in support of Kirk's, "He's right, and he's done it before!"

"How come he still lives?" Tyyle said to Styles.

"It was remotely controlled, giving me time to escape," Kirk added to back up Styles' statement. Tyyle emerged from behind his large desk and stood towering in front of Kirk.

"Maybe I have misjudged you, Captain Kirk. I accept your offer, but I must know the stakes."

"If I lose, my crew and ship will surrender to you with no resistance. But if I win, you must free all the captives and leave this space." Kirk's words became clear to Tyyle but it took him a while to think of alternatives. He walked towards the window with his back to Kirk as he tried to get to grips with this wager.

"I agree, but to increase the odds, you will battle me!" Tyyle said sharply, knowing full well that he had the physical ability to annihilate Kirk completely.

On the bridge all officers were busy since Saavik had picked up the cloaked vessel on the edge of their scanners. Spock was sitting calmly in the centre seat, listening in to the conversation on the Emarici ship. Suddenly McCoy stepped onto the bridge with Dr. Peterson, who was very suspicious of their predicament.

"What's going on, Spock?" McCoy asked.

"It seems we've located the cloaked Emarici ship on the edge of our long range scanners," Spock replied, trying not to create a confrontation in the process.

"And Jim?"

"We've located his signal and have just learned of his plans for escape."

"Why don't we just blow both alien ships to bits, as they could have called for reinforcements?" Peterson said, putting his views forward strongly.

"I have thought of that possibility, Doctor, and my reason why we should not attack is that our Captain and the crew of the Excelsior are on that ship," Spock replied.

"But should you not be thinking of the protection of Federation space from maniacs like that?" Peterson said as he challenged Spock in words.

"Those decisions lie with our Captain, Doctor, because without his Human skills, it would be like trying to run this ship by computer, following logical moves, logical thoughts and ideas, and that - frankly - would be our downfall. As you know, a computer can easily be deceived by illogical ideas - I've seen it happen. For example, on...."

"Shut up, Spock!" McCoy said, feeling sick and tired of Spock's logic. "Dr. Peterson, I think you'd better give up. I've tried it before, it's like trying to play chess with a supercomputer which would checkmate you on your first move." Peterson said nothing after McCoy's advice and then left silently.

"Doctor, you never cease to amaze me with your colourful similes," Spock said with admiration.

"Spock, the way you talked to Peterson...it's as though - oh, forget it," McCoy said, feeling that it would be hard for Spock to understand his emotional words.

"Doctor, your mind will forever be full of illogical feelings, and they will be your undoing. Logic clearly suggests that a flawed mind is always easily accessible to any alien force of great telepathic ability," Spock said openly, as he told McCoy of his own weakness.

"Is that all, Spock?" McCoy said, feeling rather annoyed.

"I believe I've said all that is necessary."

Saavik quickly turned to give her mentor an important message. "Mr. Spock, the Emarici scout ship has assumed a parallel course to us, and they are signalling they are ready."

"Mr. Spock, Captain Kirk on the line," Uhura said.

"Put him through on the chair speaker, and Lt. Saavik, give me a voice check," ordered Spock, with high suspicions of Kirk's condition.

"Aye sir," replied the Bantu communications officer.

"Mr. Spock, Kirk here," said the recognisable voice on the main comm. speaker.

"Captain, are you all right?"

"I am unharmed for now. Stand by on this channel - oh, and prepare for our departure to Delta Vega. I think there will be a party down there. Prepare a welcoming committee. Kirk out."

"Well, Lieutenant?" Spock asked, facing Saavik.

"It is the Captain speaking, and there is no sign of mental resistance in his voice pattern," replied Saavik as she checked the computer.

"Mr. Sulu, set a direct course for Delta Vega, warp five."

"Aye sir, warp five," replied Sulu. Quickly the Enterprise began to build up speed from space normal to warp, followed closely by the Emarici scout craft, and finally the Emarici mother ship, which followed on the Enterprise's warp residue, trying to keep its distance as much as possible.

"It seems, Doctor, that our final confrontation with the Emarici warriors will be on Delta Vega, which means we can plan our Captain's release without haste," Spock said to Dr. McCoy, who stared at him blankly.

"Well, Captain Kirk, now that you have made your transmission, it is time for the mind probe." Tytle looked to one of his guards. "Take Captain Kirk away and prepare him for the probe." Kirk tried to struggle free from the guard's large arms, but he was no match for his strength and size.

"Commander, what about the other Earthling Captain?" said the guard standing by Styles.

"Take him back to his cage!"

Walking along the corridor with his arms tightly held by the Emarici officer's large hands, Kirk continued to struggle with all his might, knowing what his mind would reveal would destroy the Federation's future. Suddenly he was dragged like a dead body into a large, brightly lit, circular room, which had one curved window looking into the control room. It contained only a chair with an inverted bowl-shaped object held over the seat by a black, flexible rod. It was obvious to Kirk that he was to be strapped into the chair with the bowl placed over his head.

At this stage Kirk was helpless. Despite his struggles, the Emarici officer quickly tied him to the chair and placed the object over his head. After a few minutes of waiting Kirk noticed two officers walking into the control room; one of them was Tytle.

"Welcome to my mind probe. The pain will intensify the harder you resist." Tyyle quickly signalled his officer to go ahead with the machine. After every light switch was activated on the control panel the room Kirk was in darkened.

Suddenly the large viewing window began to darken, and faint images slowly appeared as the probe felt around the surface of Kirk's mind, as Kirk himself watched his secrets being revealed. Pictures of Earth's past appeared; there was Spock dressed in his white robe walking along San Francisco waterfront, images of humpback whales, and Dr. Gillian Taylor who was now in his time. As the pictures began to move faster and faster Kirk tried to resist, but the pain increased as images of the Genesis project appeared, then David Marcus', Kruge's and Carol's faces. Then the room lit up with the destruction of both the Enterprise and the Reliant. Tyyle was amazed by the pictures he saw, but Kirk was now in excruciating pain; as he closed his eyes tightly he could feel the sweat dripping from his forehead as the images whisked by. Then suddenly he blacked out and the images on the screen faded with him.

"Guards!" Tyyle ordered abruptly. "Put the Captain with the others." Tyyle slowly turned away to face the wall behind him. "Impressive, very impressive. Maybe we should take a closer look at his planet when our task is completed."

One of the guards released Kirk from his bonds and dragged him away to the large cells.

The cell which was occupied by Styles opened, and one of the Emarici guards fended off anyone who tried to attack him with his gun, while the other guard threw Kirk's limp body to the floor. As the doors closed officers quickly surrounded Kirk's body to see who it was the aliens had tortured.

One Chinese officer took a close look at his face and said, "It's Admiral Kirk!" Captain Styles then stepped forward to see what the commotion was.

"He's Captain Kirk - he was demoted," Styles said, looking at the body. "Somebody give me a tunic, this man's been through hell," he added as he grabbed one of the officers' red tunics to prop up Kirk's head for comfort. "For Christ's sake, give the man some air!" he continued, noticing the other officers crowding around the body of the legendary Captain Kirk.

After lying unconscious for nearly two hours, Kirk finally came to his senses. Finding himself surrounded by other Starfleet officers, he thought the alien conflict was over and won by his own people.

"What happened...is it over?" Kirk asked.

"Captain Styles," said the female Andorian officer, "Captain Kirk is coming round."

"Thanks, Karras," Styles said as he stood up and headed towards Kirk. "Jim, are you all right?"

"Oh, just about...I feel like I've been hit by a car," Kirk said, remembering one that had almost knocked him down. "Where am I?"

"You're with us, in one of Tyyle's stinking cells," Styles said. "What the hell happened to you, Jim?"

Kirk slowly sat up and began to massage his stiff neck. "One of Tyyle's mind probes. I hope he hasn't worked out the part about the Genesis torpedo," he said, looking at Styles. "Anyway, how long have I been out?"

"Two hours."

"Great, all we have to do is wait until we reach Delta Vega."

"Why?" Styles asked eagerly.

Kirk pointed to his bronze coloured Starfleet insignia. "There's a transmitter in here linking me to my own ship, which I hope is close by, although I doubt it." Kirk slowly stood up to get his blood circulating. "Everything that is said is picked up through this receiver and is recorded on my ship."

"Which means your officers will be prepared for any attack and will help free us?" Styles finished off, hoping what he said was right.

"Right, but I just hope they did get the message." Kirk began to look around the cell. "Andy, is there no way out of here?" he asked.

"No, there's no physical or mechanical means of opening it," Styles answered Kirk's question. Kirk sat down where he was, hoping that his signal did get through to the Enterprise.

"You know that self-destruct threat I made to Tyyle? I just hope he and that other ship of his are there if all else fails." Kirk looked sad. "We don't want to drag them back to Earth with us, do we now?"

"Jim, you know when you fight Tyyle on Delta Vega?" Kirk gave a distinctive, "Hmm" to Styles' question. "You know you haven't got much of a chance - just look at him compared to you. Jim, he'll tear you apart the minute he touches you!"

"I know; I'll just have to do the best I can," Kirk said, knowing full well that he was faced with a 'no win' situation.

Karras, the female Andorian, then spoke out in her soft voice, "Captain Kirk, is our ship still out there, and what of our freedom?"

"The Excelsior's on tow behind the Enterprise," Kirk answered.

"Then the Enterprise survives?" Karras asked with the sound of hope in her voice.

"Yes, she does, but I don't know if she has received our transmission."

Suddenly a voice shouted out from within the crowd of seated officers, "What about our freedom?"

"Who said that?" Kirk asked.

"I did," said the officer as he stood up to make himself known.

"This is Lt. Bates, my First Officer," Styles remarked to Kirk.

"Well, Mr. Bates, when we reach Delta Vega we will be released," Kirk said.

"What's wrong with now, Captain Kirk?" Bates asked.

"Come to your senses, man!" Kirk said, annoyed. "Where will we go if we do try and take over? I doubt we could handle this ship; their technology is far beyond our comprehension. Even more, we can't escape from these cells. As far as I could see the doors are opened by sensor pads - which certainly aren't geared to our hand prints!"

Bates remained silent and sat back down.

"What's the plan then, Jim?" Styles said with eagerness.

"If all goes to plan they'll all assemble - well, most of them - on the planet's surface to witness my battle," Kirk said as he tapped his finger on his insignia, hoping that Spock was picking up every word. "My officers will try to surround the opposition, I hope before the fight."

"Jim, what about your ship? If they think you're going to order it to self-destruct, they could try to destroy it first," Styles said, trying to consider the pros and cons of the operation.

"Well, Mr. Spock, my First Officer, has seen to that. We've already worked out a plan using your ship which is now operating on half power, which I don't think they know." Styles' eyes widened at the news of his ship's recovery. "We've set a small crew to run her, and using her new scanners, she will be our back-up. Does that sound feasible to you?" asked Kirk.

"I don't know, Jim, you seem to be cutting it a bit fine." Scratching the receding hair on his head, Styles turned away from Kirk. "It's all speculation... just say your Mr. Spock is not receiving the transmissions, just say they don't get to you in time before the fight, what then?"

"Then we all say goodbye to freedom!" Kirk said.

"Have you ever considered that weapon they used on us that brought us here in the first place?"

"I think we took care of that during our first battle. We picked up transmissions from this mother ship to their scout ship, informing them that they had lost all power to some gizmo which we couldn't translate." Suddenly Kirk remembered something. "Do you by any chance know an officer named Robin Watson?"

"I can't say that I do. There are over five hundred officers on this ship and we haven't been together very long. Why?"

"We found her in her quarters, unconscious. It seems she made her escape via the sonic shower which neutralised the transportation effects."

"Very interesting," Styles said with curiosity.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Captain's personal log: stardate unknown

I have lost trace of time on this Emarici vessel, as I am being held prisoner with over five hundred other Starfleet officers from the U.S.S. Excelsior. It feels like I've been trapped in this unusual alien cell for days on end!

I feel now that any plans I made earlier on will be doomed to fail, but I have faith in Spock, and it is that faith that keeps me fighting on, maybe not physically but surely mentally.

Despite the special transmitter attached to my Starfleet insignia, I still have my doubts that Mr. Spock has received anything I said during my confrontation with the Emarici Commander Tyyle.

Slowly I am beginning to realise just what we are dealing with. This new alien race can be just as deadly as the Klingon or even the Romulan Empire. Thus I am forced to prevent them from reaching our solar system.

"Mr. Spock, we are now entering the Delta Vega sector," Sulu reported.

Spock quickly turned round to face him after speaking to Saavik. "Very good, Mr. Sulu, you may secure from warp speed," Spock answered, turning back to Saavik. "Lieutenant, keep a secure fix on both alien vessels, making sure they are still within our scanning range."

"Aye sir, continuing to scan," Saavik replied coolly, the blue lights in her viewer reflecting on her face as she stared into it.

In the Doctor's surgery all was quiet as usual, with only the sound of the pulse meter beating away to the sound of the patient's heartbeat. Suddenly a negro orderly came rushing into Dr. McCoy's office, waking the good Doctor up from his long, tired slumber in his large, reclining office chair.

"What's up, Minyana?" McCoy said tiredly as he slowly yawned loudly and began rubbing his eyes.

"It's the woman, Doctor, she's come out of her coma."

"Have you checked her pulse and respiratory rate?" McCoy asked concernedly.

"Yes, Doctor, her B.P. is normal and so is her breathing. There's also no sign of any brain damage," replied Minyana professionally. Slowly McCoy stood up from his chair and remained still for a second until he felt his blood coming into full circulation in his legs again, and he then moved towards the surgery with his orderly tagging along.

"How long?" McCoy said.

"Just for a few seconds, then I called you."

"Give me a hypo with twenty c.c.s of insomaxe to prevent her lapsing back into a coma." Quickly the young orderly made his way to the chemical cabinet to get what McCoy asked for.

"Here you go, Doctor," Minyana replied as he handed over the hypo to McCoy who instantly spray injected it into the patient's right arm.

McCoy and Minyana stood patiently by the young Lieutenant who was lying motionless on the bed. She began to groan for a few seconds, then gradually her body functions came to life. She lifted her right hand to her head as though she had a bad headache; her eyelids fluttered and then stayed open; she looked at McCoy. In reaction to seeing the Doctor's face she tried to sit up but McCoy held her back, pushing her shoulders down lightly against the hard padding.

"What happened? Where am I and who are you?" asked the patient tiredly as she continued to stare at McCoy.

"Take it easy, Lieutenant. You're on board the starship Enterprise and I'm the ship's chief surgeon, Dr. Leonard McCoy. It seems you've received quite a large concussion," McCoy said lightly, so as not to alarm her.

"What?" replied the Lieutenant to McCoy's last sentence, which she couldn't even begin to understand.

"I mean you were rendered unconscious for over twenty hours on the Excelsior," McCoy said, knowing she was slowly regaining her strength.

"Dr. McCoy," Minyana called out softly. "Shall I inform Mr. Spock?"

McCoy glanced at the orderly. "No, it's not necessary, I'll tell him myself later, since he's got better things to do at the moment."

"Aye sir," replied the orderly.

McCoy quickly returned his attention to his patient. "Tell me, Lt. Watson, what happened on your ship?"

"It's a long story," replied the Lieutenant.

"We appear to have plenty of time," said Minyana.

On the bridge everything was operating smoothly. Saavik was still scanning. The other bridge officers were all working at their peak in order to make this a successful mission.

"Estimating planet orbital approach in one point one hours," reported Sulu.

"Any changes executed by those other ships yet, Lieutenant?"

"No sir," replied Saavik.

"Are you still monitoring and recording our Captain's conversations, Uhura?"

"Yes sir, and there's still nothing worth noting," Uhura said. "Except... a while back his heart rate jumped slightly for a few minutes. I just thought it was a natural condition."

"Uhura, those few minutes could mean his life. Has it ever occurred to you that those wave patterns could indicate pain or torture?" Spock's speculative words struck an emotional chord in Uhura's mind, making her think that her actions could have endangered the Captain's life. She knew that Spock was only making a logical guess, but his guesses were usually correct

"Aye sir," Uhura said, then she quickly turned back to her work.

"Delta Vega dead ahead," Sulu said sharply.

"Increase magnification to factor four, Mr. Sulu," ordered Spock, and Sulu replied accordingly.

"Mag. four on viewer." The image of Delta Vega increased in size, revealing its bright orangey coloured atmosphere with the swirling mass of pinkish white clouds which sparsely littered its atmosphere.

Delta Vega; a planet completely uninhabited and only slightly smaller than Earth. It was a desolate planet, but very rich in crystals and minerals for the Federation. Now man would once again set foot on this barren world, as the Enterprise crew had done over seventeen years previously under the orders of Captain James T. Kirk. It looked as though Delta Vega would once again become a battlefield for supremacy.

"Mr. Sulu, set a standard orbital approach pattern," Spock ordered.

"Standard orbit, aye sir," Sulu replied as he began to programme the ship to orbit the planet ahead. "Co-ordinates are now set and locked in for standard orbit, sir."

"Thank you," Spock replied. "Lt. Uhura, inform the Emarican scout ship we are now entering orbit around Delta Vega."

"Aye sir, transmitting now."

Once again a small doorway appeared in one of the cell cube's faces and two Emarici officers entered.

"You, Captain Kirk and Captain Styles, will be transported to the planet which our scout ship now orbits," ordered the second guard who came in. Kirk and Styles could do nothing but follow their orders.

After the two Starfleet officers' short journey they ended up in a large, perfectly square, room, where they were met by over fifty other Emarician officers, all heavily armed.

"You two will remain here as ordered!" said one of the guards.

"Jim, do you think this is one of their transporter rooms?" Styles whispered to Kirk as he glanced around the room carefully.

"I think so. It looks like they're planning for an invasion by the looks of their equipment."

"So what now?" Styles asked.

"So we wait for the right moment," Kirk replied. "First things first. We must all reach the planet in one piece."

The door of the room they'd entered began to close slowly. When it finally locked, a blue light lit up around the door sills, then suddenly the whole room was filled with a bright green light.

"Yes, I was right, this is their transporter room!" Styles said as he and Kirk felt their bodies tingle as their molecules were quickly broken down into simple forms of free floating energy.

Just as quickly as their bodies were disassembled by the ship's transporter beam, they reappeared on a small, high plateau on the desolate surface of Delta Vega, just a mile and a half away from the main mining station of the planet. From where they stood they could clearly see the station down below.

At the moment the weather was calm with a slightly cool breeze blowing in from the north; darkness was slowly coming in and shelter was needed before the windy weather increased. Kirk and Styles looked around the spot they had landed on but found they were still under heavy guard. The Emarici officers began to disperse from their transporter landing positions to check out the area they'd landed in for any unwanted guests. Suddenly another wide beam of emerald green light appeared bringing Commander Tyyle, who was closely followed by four armed officers.

Slowly Tyyle walked up to Kirk. "Well, well, so this is one of your Federation planets. Why does it look so empty?" he asked.

"This mining station is fully automated. An Earth cargo ship only passes by here once every twenty years," Kirk said coolly.

Tyyle swiftly turned away from Kirk and ordered his crew to line up in single file, ready for their journey towards the mining station. Kirk and Styles moved behind the Emarici, and were in turn flanked by two guards with raised weapons aimed at their backs.

"I hope your men are down," Styles told Kirk as they were marched down the

plateau towards the dilithium cracking station.

Slowly Throogue began to regain consciousness and, quickly opening his eyes, he found himself lying down flat on a black, thinly padded bench bed, looking upwards at a steel blue coloured ceiling. With a sudden automatic reaction, he sat up on the bed and began to stare around the room he was in.

He found he was held captive in a small, bare, five metre square room, which had no furniture except the bench bed and one large, scorching light in the centre of the ceiling. Staring around the room's steel blue walls, he suddenly noticed that the exit had no doors, but a long strip of light that emitted a high-pitched humming noise lined the inner edge where a door would have been placed. Throogue slowly stood up and attempted to draw out his weapons only to find they had already been taken by the Earthlings. With intense anger at being so easily overpowered, Throogue ran into the open doorway, only to find that he was forced back by a powerful electric charge which danced around his body as he was thrown back against the bench bed and the wall it rested on.

"You will all be destroyed for this outrage!" Throogue exclaimed to anyone who might be near the room.

One of the two Security men who were guarding the Emarici officer looked into the cell to investigate the commotion that he'd just heard. On seeing the Emarici prisoner slowly getting up off the bench bed after the shock, the guard quickly made his way to the nearest wall communicator.

"Bridge, this is Ensign Perise. The alien in the cell has regained consciousness and has tried to get out," he reported.

On the bridge Uhura quickly relayed the message to Spock, who instantly left to interrogate the Emarici officer, but before entering the lift, Spock ordered Uhura to tell Dr. McCoy to meet him at the brig.

Just after leaving the turbolift Spock met up with Dr. McCoy, who was walking in the same direction down the narrow, long corridor towards the brig.

"Well, what do you have for me, Spock?" McCoy asked.

"It's not a matter of what I have, Doctor, but what we have held in custody," Spock replied simply.

"Well, however you put it, you still have something for me to see or do," McCoy said, trying to get what he said straight. After travelling through metres of corridors they finally reached their goal, the brig, where two armed guards stood careful watch on their prisoner.

Spock signalled to one of the guards to lower the forcefield on the cell. As the guard keyed in the code on the wall panel the light which filled the edge of the door slowly faded, as did the noise that accompanied it. Silently and swiftly Spock entered the occupied cell, followed closely by McCoy and an armed guard.

Seeing the prisoner sitting silently and looking at his captors, Spock spoke before the alien could begin. "You will not be harmed in any way if you give us the answers to my questions." Spock glanced at McCoy to see if he had anything else to add to his question in connection with the Captain, but there was no reaction.

"You will all die for your pathetic actions towards me, and I shall see to it myself when I am rescued," said Throogue staring viciously towards Spock and McCoy. Spock felt nothing at his vengeful words, but McCoy could feel the cold

fear in his mind, a fear that the alien might indeed escape.

"Revenge is illogical; it will gain you nothing except a self-satisfaction based on your deepest emotions," Spock answered. Suddenly one of the guards moved forward to protect Spock, as Throogue looked as though he was in a position to pounce on the unarmed Vulcan. In doing so, the guard almost stumbled on a small, cylindrical object on the floor.

Carefully the guard picked up the silver object which resembled a two inch silver cigar.

"Here, sir, the prisoner must have dropped this when he tried to make for the door," said the guard as he handed it to Dr. McCoy to examine; in turn McCoy handed it to Spock for his opinion of what it was.

"This must be a transceiver of some kind; am I right in saying so?" Spock asked as he made a thorough examination of the Emarician technology.

"Yes, but you are too late, they would have found out by now."

"Why has our Captain been transported to your mother ship?" McCoy demanded sharply.

"He is no longer on the mother ship, but on the planet ready to face death at my commander's hand!"

Spock quickly raised his left eyebrow in response to Throogue's statement. "I regret that you must accompany us to the planet's surface."

Throogue said nothing in response to Spock's statement. Spock then turned towards the exit and left silently, followed by McCoy and the guard who covered their backs.

"Do you think that it's wise to take him down with us?" McCoy said as he followed Spock down the corridor.

"He would seem to be our only hope of regaining the Captain's freedom," Spock replied.

"How?"

"A form of trade," Spock said. "Our Captain and the crew of the Excelsior for his life."

"Have you not considered that they may not buy it?" McCoy responded sharply. "You're asking for so much. If you haven't forgotten, they have the edge over us; what good is one man to them? The commander of that ship can always find another!" Spock said nothing and entered the nearest turbolift.

"Bridge," Spock ordered. "Doctor, there are always alternative solutions, and the one I may use has only once worked successfully."

McCoy quickly changed the subject. "The Emarici officer seems to be following Jim's idea of having a hidden transmitter."

"But we must hope that his has not yet been discovered, as we found theirs," Spock said.

The lift doors opened to reveal the bridge; Spock and McCoy walked out.

"Mr. Spock," Saavik said, "we have picked up multiple lifeform readings on the planet's surface near the station."

"Lt. Uhura, can you pick up the Captain's signal?" said Spock.

"Yes sir. It seems he's with Captain Styles en route to the cracking station."

"Good. Maintain radio silence; we'll be beaming down there," Spock said.

"I'm coming with you; there could be injured," McCoy insisted.

"Very well, Doctor. Mr. Sulu, you have the con." Spock quickly re-entered the lift, followed by McCoy.

In the transporter room, garbed in their heavy field jackets, Spock and McCoy waited for a security team and the prisoner, who were to beam down with them. A transporter officer stepped out of the armoury room, handing McCoy and Spock a phaser pack each.

The door opened and a small group of heavily armed officers entered, surrounding Throogue, whose hands were bound together.

"You may unbind him," Spock said to one of the officers closest to the alien. Spock, McCoy, Throogue and three guards stepped onto the transporter pads, ready to beam down. The other five security people waited close by for their turn to beam down to the surface. Suddenly the six forms dematerialised in a blue column of soft light as their bodies began their transition to the planet's barren surface.

"Mr. Sulu, transporter room reports that they are beaming down to the surface," said Uhura.

"Acknowledge their signal, Uhura," Sulu said. "Oh, and Lt. Saavik, keep a close monitor on their movements down below; we don't want to lose them too." Saavik stared without expression towards Sulu and said nothing as she continued her work.

Under the dark Vegan night sky, in a small, rocky area surrounded by high mountainous peaks and almost endless chasms, six narrow columns of blue light appeared, lighting up a small portion of the area like a large spotlight, creating blue coloured rocks and deep shadows on the veiny cracks. Slowly the lights faded away, leaving behind six forms who swiftly moved from their standing positions and another group of five blue lights appeared just where the first six forms had materialised. Finally, as the lights faded away, small sounds could be heard echoing sharply against the surrounding walls of rock.

"Hey, who turned out the lights!" McCoy hissed in a whisper which also echoed for a few seconds as he tried to look around, but he could see nothing but black on black moving outlines.

"Nobody turned out the lights, Doctor; if you do not know the time, I must tell you that this part of the planet is facing away from its neighbouring star," Spock informed McCoy as he began to feel in his field jacket pocket for a torch. Finding it, Spock quickly turned it on McCoy and aimed it near to his face so as not to dazzle him.

"I was only making a little joke, Spock," McCoy replied to Spock's useless information. Suddenly another five torch lights appeared from five other officers. Slowly Spock made his way to where the prisoner Throogue was standing alone in the dark.

"Do you have any knowledge of where your commander is or what he intends to do with his prisoners?" Spock said to the large shadowy figure.

"Your Captain is preparing for a battle with my commander in the mining station. Whether he wins or loses he will still die!" Throogue said in a haunting voice.

"Why do you not resist giving us this information?" Spock said with curiosity. "I thought you would rather die than betray your commander." Spock began to shine the torch in Throogue's face, which gave the Emarici officer a ghostly image.

"Why, you ask?" Throogue said. "Because I hope to take his rank. My comrades are too exhausted under his command because he pushes us without rest. I also do this because you will lose, and I think it fitting that you should know our plans before you are captured and executed."

"I rather prefer your first reason," McCoy interrupted.

Spock quickly turned the light away from Throogue's face and called two officers to keep a close guard on the prisoner before they could begin the journey.

"Gentlemen, shall we move on towards the station? - and keep your phasers ready on stun," Spock ordered.

"It's about time too, it's getting mighty cold here," McCoy said with relief.

"It will get much colder," Spock warned.

"That's good to hear," McCoy snapped, throwing in a sarcastic remark.

Leading the way, Spock lifted the tricorder from his shoulder and turned it on in order to find the closest lifeform signal. Silently he began to walk away into the dark, narrow chasm, followed by his officers and a prisoner, with only his torch and tricorder to guide him in the right direction.

On the Enterprise bridge Saavik began to follow the landing party's movements closely. Uhura was ready to receive any incoming signals and Sulu was waiting for his next chance for action, if and when it occurred.

Suddenly Saavik called out, taking everyone's attention on the bridge. "I seem to have found something close by, following the landing party." Saavik quickly tuned in her scanners. "There seem to be four moving objects, moving up fast in two directions."

"Uhura, try and contact the team, tell them they are being followed," Sulu ordered.

"Enterprise to Spock."

On the planet below, Spock's communicator gave out a high-pitched whistle.

"Mr. Spock here, what is it, Uhura?"

"Four objects have been picked up on our monitors, closing in behind you fast," replied Uhura.

"Thank you, Commander, Spock out."

"What's up, Spock?" McCoy said.

"We seem to be being followed."

"Ha, ha!" Throogue said. "You see my officers are on your trail."

"Baker, Burroughs, scout around the area for ten minutes, contact us if you find anything. Do not engage the enemy!" Spock said sharply, knowing that they were sometimes trigger happy and adventurous. "You others wait here while I help them." Spock again swiftly walked off into the dark, but this time alone, with his phaser ready at hand.

"Looks like it's going to be a cold night," McCoy moaned quietly to himself.

Ten minutes later Spock came back empty handed, and so did Burroughs, looking exhausted.

"Where's Baker?"

"I don't know, Mr. Spock, he must still be looking," replied Burroughs who wasn't even sure himself.

Pulling out his communicator, Spock hoped that Baker would answer. "Lt. Baker, report! Lt. Baker, come in!" He then gave up and replaced his communicator. "We don't even know what is out there, but I'm sure they are Throogue's officers." Throogue still remained silent to Spock's questioning remark.

"We can't just leave him there!" exclaimed Burroughs.

"We have no time, we must keep moving. If we stay here too long we could all die from the cold," said Spock without any emotion in his words or face.

"Then I'll go and look for him on my own," Burroughs replied.

"That's out of the question, I don't want to lose another man. You will do as you are ordered and move on." Burroughs still said nothing at Spock's cold attitude. "He could be on his way to the station if he can't find us."

"Let's hope so, because I'm holding you responsible if he's dead."

McCoy looked with disgust at Burroughs. "You are out of order, Mr. Burroughs!"

"It's all right, Doctor," Spock said in defence of Burroughs' words. "Wait here for ten minutes; if I'm not back then, go on without me."

"Spock, are you crazy?" McCoy said in annoyance at Spock's stubbornness.

"Remember, Doctor, the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many." Spock's words rang a bell in McCoy's mind, and he replied with silence.

After only eight minutes Spock returned with Baker's phaser intact and unused.

"He must have dropped his phaser. I still can't find any trace of him."

"You did what any Human would do, Spock. Come on, let's get out of here," said McCoy grimly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The mining station was gargantuan; with all the hundreds of metres of lattice steelwork pipes and large chemical chambers the size of six storey houses, it looked as though it needed over a thousand people to help maintain it. Yet in reality it didn't need anyone at all. Slowly a whole platoon of

Emarici officers, ants in comparison to its size, flowed in through the building's main doorway.

"I never thought I would return here again," said Kirk.

"Well, there's always a second chance," Styles replied hopefully.

"Yes, I believe you're right," Kirk answered, as he carefully thought about Styles' words. "It's getting dark quickly, isn't it?" he went on, trying to change the subject.

Suddenly Commander Tyyle signalled with a wave of his right hands to one of his senior officers to wait a moment while he marched up to his two prisoners who were positioned near the back of his platoon.

"Well, Captain Kirk, we have reached our goal!" said Tyyle with a pleased tone to his voice. "Now you will lead the way in, and remember, no tricks of any kind or our friend here and his comrades will die quickly." Tyyle then pulled out two of his rod-like weapons from the holsters on his chest belt and aimed them squarely at Kirk's head and chest. "Now move, or I will exterminate you where you stand without hesitation!" Slowly Kirk began to walk to the front of the line, with Tyyle following closely behind with his weapons prodding at his back as he walked.

As Kirk led the way into the main control bay area, a light automatically switched itself on when he reached a certain point in the room. With a sudden reaction to the light coming on, a small number of guards at the front of the group instantly aimed their weapons in all directions, making sure anything that even twitched would not escape their sights alive.

"It's only the light sensor; it comes on automatically when I enter to conserve power," Kirk said, trying to reassure them of their safety.

Tyyle then called out sharply to one of his officers in his native tongue. "Nee thro, cou'p las!"

"What's going on?" Kirk asked Tyyle abruptly, hoping that the worst was not yet to come.

"Your comrades held captive in my ship's cells will all be transported here soon, as you bargained for, Captain."

"Well, at least you're a... thing of your word," Kirk replied.

Coming out of the forest of mountains onto a hilly, rocky area, Spock could see faint lights in the distance. Looking at his tricorder for any recognisable patterns, he came to the conclusion that they were nearing the dilithium cracking station.

"It seems we have almost reached our destination; only a quarter mile to go," Spock said to the party following behind him.

"I could swear it was a full mile," McCoy said sarcastically, feeling rather out of breath and cold. "Well, Spock, what do you suggest we do when we get there, say 'Can we come in from the cold?'"

"No, Doctor, I propose to take the first logical step, that is to scout around the area, making sure we know exactly where they are and where they have placed their sentries. That way planning will be easier."

"What about our four-armed friend?" McCoy asked, looking at the prisoner to



see the expression on his cold face.

"He will be closely guarded while we execute our first order of business," Spock replied.

Finally reaching the station, Spock and his band hid themselves behind several large, monolithic structures, only twenty five metres away from the main exit. Silently Spock made a series of hand signals in the four directions where his officers were positioned from the enemy's sight.

"Gentlemen, over here, quickly," Spock called out softly. Moving stealthily to where Spock was kneeling, the eight officers quickly conferred with him behind one of the large, stone monoliths.

"What about him?" McCoy asked, looking at the prisoner who was carefully gagged and tied to one of the monoliths a couple of metres behind them in the shadows of the rocks.

"You, Doctor, will stay here on guard while we separate in pairs to search for a good route to get inside," Spock said.

"No way, I'm coming with you," said McCoy harshly.

"Doctor, you're a valuable asset to us, we can't afford to lose you."

"Well, I can't afford to lose two of Starfleet's best officers," McCoy said, counter-attacking Spock's argument.

"Point taken, Doctor," said Spock. "Remember gentlemen, meet back here in two hours. You, Lts. Hanson and Rogers, scout around the outer perimeter for any guards. Mr. Jackson, Mr. Luic, you take the back emergency exit. Mr. Anderson and Mr. Wang, you two check the boilers, and Mr. Sal-ki and Mr. Jones, check through the boiler control rooms on the far side. And remember to be back on time."

Suddenly a bright green light lit up the area far ahead of them near the main exit, which was heavily guarded by four heavily armed Emarici officers.

"What the hell is that light?" said one of Spock's officers.

"It appears to be a transporter beam of some kind," Spock answered the officer's question. Slowly the green light dissipated, leaving three large cubes which were all perfectly lined up. Suddenly another two green lights appeared, then another and another, until two rows of fifteen cubes lined a quarter of the station's entire length.

"My God!" McCoy said softly in amazement.

"Fascinating!" Spock replied, seeing the way they were transported down so quickly without any difficulty over size and number.

"What could they be, Mr. Spock?" asked one of the officers.

"I don't really know yet, Mr. Gutanga," Spock replied. The ten starship officers waited silently, hoping the cubes would not increase their difficulties, but nothing happened except that they glowed a whitish colour, with some dark, figure-like shapes shifting from place to place inside.

"Well, Mr. Spock, how does your logic explain that?" McCoy asked.

"To be honest, Doctor, I don't really know," Spock said, wishing he did. "They could be a great many things, cargo crates, some form of superpowered weapon or even prison cells." Spock then looked at his other officers. "Let's

go," he ordered, as the others quickly dispersed in pairs in four different directions.

"Do you know exactly what you're going to do when we get there, and what we are actually looking for?" McCoy asked softly as he and Spock slowly neared the main exit while remaining hidden from sight.

"If it pleases you to know, Doctor, I plan to find their weak spots where there are guards; this will allow us to infiltrate them and force them to surrender," Spock said, answering McCoy's question.

Moving silently and slowly, Spock and McCoy finally reached one of the cubes near the station exit, where they were to enter secretly, past the guards. Looking closely at the huge cube he was standing by, Spock made the assumption that they were some kind of prison cell, and that at this moment they were fully occupied, but by what, he did not know.

"Very unusual objects; they look simple and yet they could be of a complexity which goes far beyond our own technology," Spock said as he carefully studied one of the cube walls, which felt cold to the touch.

"Well, they won't be doing much good standing here as ornaments, they must have some specific purpose to the Emaricis," McCoy said quietly, so as not to attract attention. Spock said nothing as he continued on to the door, which was guarded by four large, heavily armed soldiers. "What now?"

"We must try to find a way past those guards," replied Spock.

"Right, I'll take the two on the left and you the other two on the right," McCoy said sarcastically, as though it was what he actually planned.

"You are very perceptive, Doctor," said Spock as he was about to advance with his phaser on stun, but he was halted by McCoy's grasp on his left arm.

"I was only joking, Spock!" McCoy said sharply but quietly.

"It's our only option; our phasers set on a wide dispersion stun should prevent any unnecessary action on their part. Besides, we have our Captain and the Excelsior officers to rescue."

McCoy replied with a blank stare, then he released Spock's arm. Silently they advanced, edging closer and closer to the main exit until they were well within firing range of their targets. "Ready, Doctor," Spock said with his phaser aimed at his target. McCoy replied with a silent nod as he too aimed his phaser.

"Fire!" Spock ordered. The phasers emitted bright orange beams, engulfing the four Emarici officers. The noise of the phasers was easily muffled by the breeze.

"Let's go!" Spock finally ordered.

In a large open area inside the station, over fifty Emarici officers formed a circle.

On opposite sides of the small battleground were Kirk, looking rather exhausted from the long walk, and Tyyle, who looked fresh and active, on the other. Kirk could hear around him the loud screams and cheers of the totally alien crowd for Tyyle. Standing behind Kirk was Styles, who was considering the fight thoughtfully.

"Jim, you have to fight dirty at all costs. You know what it means for your- self and the rest of our crew if you don't," Styles said, trying to urge him on.

"Don't you think I know that?" Kirk said.

Suddenly Kirk saw the large figure of Tyyle closing on him fast. Kirk could do nothing but take a chance, and suicidally run and jump-kick him with both feet to his chest. His attempt worked by a miracle, making Tyyle stumble backwards a couple of feet to land on the floor with a heavy thud, but he quickly rose again. Kirk tried to repeat his feat, but was unsuccessful as Tyyle did not repeat his mistake. Tyyle dodged Kirk's flying feet, and the Earth Captain landed up on the floor, with the crowd insulting him with words he could not understand, although he knew clearly what their meaning was. Slowly Kirk stood up, rubbing his right leg on which he had landed painfully. He moved around the ring, as did Tyyle, who was ready for any surprise attack from Kirk. For a few moments both opponents continued to move around the ring, wondering who was going to make the next move. Kirk knew that he wasn't going to, since his last attempt had almost cost him his right leg. So it had to be Tyyle this time, but when would he strike?

Slowly Kirk made his way back round to where Styles was standing. "He learns fast from his mistakes," Kirk said, as he tried to catch his breath.

"Try and find his weak spot," Styles urged.

Kirk and Tyyle met back in the centre of the ring. Using all four of his big, powerful arms, Tyyle swung towards Kirk's face. The right fist just missed Kirk by inches, but the second took Kirk completely by surprise, landing straight into his stomach. Kirk fell to the floor, holding his chest tightly as the pain overcame him. Slowly he rolled away from Tyyle, who gave a wicked smile.

Painfully, Kirk stood up to face Tyyle once again, then he quickly ran up to the Emarician commander and as he did so he crouched to the floor, sticking out his leg as he skidded into Tyyle. Before Tyyle could get up, Kirk leaped onto his fallen body and tried to throw a hard punch, which he found rather difficult as Tyyle's many arms blocked his fist's path. With very little effort Tyyle took the opportunity to grab Kirk's arms and slowly lifted him up into the air with his other two hands.

"Oh no!" Kirk said, as he felt himself rising off the ground. Using all he'd learned in the Academy, he quickly prepared himself for a fast, hard landing, which he knew was definitely to follow. With a hard push from Tyyle, Kirk flew into the air and almost landed on his feet, but overbalanced and fell heavily.

Secretly watching at a distance, behind a large network of thick pipes, were Spock and McCoy, who had made their way past the first sentries. But unknown to them, they themselves were also being watched.

"It's just as we heard from his transmitter, a battle to the death," Spock whispered softly.

"What can we do?" McCoy said.

"Call for back up. It looks as though we might just have a small scale war here," Spock replied; then hearing a clicking sound behind him, he quickly turned to investigate, and found four Emarici rod guns aimed at his body. "Doctor, we have guests!" Spock said to McCoy, who was deeply involved in the Captain's fight for life. Slowly McCoy turned to see another four guns aimed at him.

"It would seem I misjudged their defence," Spock added, annoying McCoy.

"Well, it's too late for that now!" said McCoy sharply. "It would seem your strategy had a few holes as well."

"I assumed they needed only four guards on the perimeter; I did not realise they had a back up defence measure," Spock replied.

"Mr. Sulu, communication coming in from the planet's surface," reported Uhura.

"Is it the Captain?" asked Sulu, who was waiting tensely.

"No, it's from Lt. Hanson. He says Mr. Spock and Dr. McCoy have been captured too. He's also asking for more help, as there are fifty or more armed Emarici," said Uhura.

"Ask for their co-ordinates," Sulu ordered, feeling that he was desperately needed down there.

"Aye sir, I already have them. It's 534 mark 5."

Sulu faced Saavik squarely. "Lt. Saavik, are you willing to release your Romulan side and join me down there?" he asked.

"Aye sir," replied Saavik without any hesitation.

"Uhura, alert fifty heavily armed guards in full field jacket wear, plus three portable phaser cannons."

"Aye sir, signalling the crew now to the transporter rooms," replied Uhura.

"Cdr. Chekov, you have the centre seat."

"Aye sir," replied the Weapons Officer.

"Lt. Uhura, make sure you keep a channel open."

"It's done, Sulu, and don't worry about us," replied Uhura with a smile. Quickly Sulu and Saavik left through the portside turbolift.

Looking very tired and out of breath, Kirk could feel his life was getting shorter with every second he stood in the ring. Suddenly a guard barged his way from behind his fellow officers, tugging Spock and Dr. McCoy with him at gun point. Tyyle turned his concentration from killing Kirk to see what this intrusion was about.

"I have been expecting you gentlemen from the Enterprise to beam down sooner or later," Tyyle said loudly, his voice echoing in the large, open spaces of the station.

"I am First Officer Spock, and this is Dr. McCoy of the Enterprise." McCoy gave a slight frown when Spock introduced him. "I believe you have our Captain and the crew of the Excelsior held captive?"

"You are correct, pointed-eared one, and now we have you too!"

"But are you not aware that we still possess the ultimate weapon which could render this whole sector highly contaminated with anti-protons and anti-neutrons?" Spock said, trying remind Tyyle of the Earth ship's threat.

"But I can destroy your ship before you can activate this device. I have seen it projected in Kirk's mind," Tyyle replied. "Now you're here, tell your ship to surrender before I destroy it!"

Spock knew that Tyyle understood the device's activation, but did not know it no longer existed. He removed the communicator from his belt and opened the lid for transmission. "Spock to Enterprise."

"Chekov here, Mr. Spock," replied the Russian officer who was now in charge of the ship.

"Where's Mr. Sulu?"

"He's just beamed...."

"That doesn't matter. You are ordered to surrender by the Emarici Commander who is with me now," said Spock, as he pressed a small button on his communicator.

"Understood, Mr. Spock," Chekov replied, seeing a red light flashing on the chair arm, indicating phase two of the operation, which was for the Excelsior to move into position near the invisible Emarici mothership, but out of sight of its scanners.

"It looks, Captain Kirk, as if we will continue with new guests who will watch their Captain die at my hands," Tyyle said.

"What happens if I lose?" Kirk asked curiously.

"Mr. Spock will show us how to work this station to its full advantage. Thus we can extract what we need for our war purposes."

Wondering what the war was, Spock asked, "Who are you going to war against?"

"Why, your planet Earth, of course - once we conquer it, we will rule the Galaxy," answered Tyyle happily.

Spock quickly raised his eyebrows, and Kirk forced his way in front of Tyyle.

"That would be impossible. We have many allies who will defend our planet..." Kirk protested.

"So do we," Tyyle counter-attacked. "Take them away and search for more intruders; destroy on sight, full intensity! We will continue our game later."

The four Starfleet officers were led away to a small room which was closely guarded by two armed officers from Tyyle's platoon.

Outside in the cold night, the last of the fifty Starfleet officers slowly materialised on the planet's almost barren surface. The area where they stood was lit up by hand held torches, which were to guide them to where the Captain was being held captive by the enemy.

Sulu, who was garbed in his heavy field jacket, fought his way out of the crowd of officers who were all talking about the situation.

"Okay, men!" Sulu called out, trying to attract their full attention. "Form up into five rows of ten!" Quickly the guards lined up in an orderly fashion, as their time was getting short and the weather was affecting them too. Suddenly another blue column of light appeared and then dissolved into nothing, leaving six five foot long metal crates. Sulu pointed to the five front row officers. "Two from each row help unload the three hand phaser cannons, and distribute

spare belt packs to each officer."

Suddenly one young officer called out to Sulu. "Sir, are we going to war?" His soft voice took Sulu's attention instantly. The young man's innocence made Sulu feel sorry for what he was about to experience.

"I hope not. This is just a precaution," Sulu replied kindly. "What's your name, son?" he asked, hoping he would see his face again after the operation was over.

"Lt. Barbue, sir."

"Well, Mr. Barbue, we're all coming out of this in one piece," Sulu replied, reassuring the young officer with his promise. Slipping the tricorder from his shoulder, Sulu studied the readings which were to guide him and his party to where the others were being held captive. "Form up, men, we're moving. Keep one cannon each at fore, aft and middle of the group. And remember, phasers on stun!"

Slowly the tricorder's bleeps led Sulu to the source, and Sulu led his small army to battle.

"Saavik to Enterprise, we're moving out," said the Romulan-Vulcan officer.

"How long have we been here, Spock?" Kirk asked calmly.

"One hour, forty five minutes," replied Spock.

"When you contacted the Enterprise Chekov said that Sulu has beamed down," Kirk said. "He could be bringing in a rescue party."

"That would be a logical assumption, Captain," replied Spock.

"Jim, got any plans?" McCoy asked abruptly.

"At this moment I'm still thinking about my men out there," Kirk responded. "It looks like the aliens have got a shoot-to-kill policy."

Spock quickly turned to Styles, giving him a sharp look. "Captain Styles, am I right in assuming your entire ship's complement is held captive in large, white, cuboidal cells just outside?"

"Yes, how did you know?" Styles said.

"It was a logical assumption. Is there any way to open them?"

"I don't know how they did it, but it wasn't mechanical," Styles replied.

"Then how did you or our Captain get out, assuming you were held in there?" Spock questioned again.

"We were in there, all right, all thirty officers. The doors just appeared... "

"Fascinating, stationary matter transmutation," Spock said with great interest in his tone.

"No, wait, Spock," Kirk said, putting forward what he thought was relevant information. "Haven't you forgotten that they have four arms? They must have some convenient way of opening doors."

"Get to the point, Jim!" McCoy said hurriedly.

"I see what you are getting at, Captain," Spock butted in, knowing what the Captain was trying to say. "As we Humans use one or two hands to open a door, these Emarici people may use all four to do the same thing."

"First things first, a plan to escape," Kirk said quietly, so as not to arouse the guards' suspicions, thinking that they could understand what he was saying.

"There it is, over there," Sulu said, pointing in the direction of faint lights in the distance.

"Affirmative. The signals appear to be closer than I thought," Saavik said, confirming her readings.

"You two," Sulu pointed and called out to two officers near him. "Scout around ahead for any lifesigns, use your tricorders. And remember, no shooting unless necessary."

After just walking twenty metres ahead of the group, the two guards found four other Federation officers heading in their direction, and looking exhausted.

"Mr. Sulu," shouted one of the guards, "over here!"

On hearing the shout, Sulu and the rest of his group hurried in the direction of the cry.

"Over here, sir," directed Saavik, seeing the officers' readings just to the right of her.

"How are they, Watkins?" Sulu asked, looking at the four tired officers.

"Jackson, Anderson and Luic are still missing, sir. Lt. Rogers here saw Wang killed by the enemy," replied Watkins, pointing at Rogers who was lying down resting.

Saavik once again activated her tricorder in an attempt to discover something more.

"Mr. Sulu, picking up multiple lifeform readings dead ahead in the mining station," reported Saavik.

"Lead the way, Lt. Saavik," Sulu ordered. "Right, men, we're moving on towards the station, be prepared for the unexpected!"

This time Saavik led the way, with Sulu and his platoon following behind.

Suddenly two guards appeared in front of the door of the small room where Kirk and his three comrades were held.

"You, Captain Kirk, are to continue your fight with Cdr. Tyyle. The rest of you will watch him die slowly," said one of the guards pointing his four weapons in the direction of the Starfleet officers.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Navigator, project a tactical view of our current position in relation to the Excelsior and both the alien vessels," Chekov ordered. Almost immediately a full computer generated, three dimensional image appeared on the main viewer screen before him.

"The Excelsior is parallelling us on the other side of the planet in the terminator region, thus covering our aft," said the navigator who was pointing out their positions as a small green circle on the monitor.

"And the other two?" added Chekov.

"The scout craft is eighteen thousand metres towards our portside stern, and is holding a uniform position in relation to our own." Quickly looking at his console readings to match the position on the screen, the navigator noticed a small difference. "Sir, the cloaked ship appears to be creeping closer to us as it parallels us!"

"Evasive action, go to red alert status!" Chekov immediately ordered.

"What's going on?" Dr. Peterson called out as he stepped from the lift onto the bridge.

"We are at red alert, and you should not be on the bridge," replied Chekov on hearing Peterson's voice.

"Well, Mr. Chekov, this does concern me when my life is under threat by an unknown lifeform!"

"I will have to remove you from the bridge, Doctor, if you do not comply with my orders," Chekov threatened.

"All right, I'm leaving!" Swiftly Dr. Peterson marched into the nearest turbolift and left silently.

"Uhura, contact Sulu's party, inform him we'll be moving out of range. He'll understand our situation," ordered Chekov.

"Aye, transmitting now," replied Uhura.

On the planet below, while Sulu was marching his men to the station, three high-pitched bleeps sounded Uhura's call on Sulu's communicator.

"Sulu here. What's up?"

"Uhura here. We'll be out of position for a while; can you manage without support?"

"Of course we can; we're fine at the moment. Sulu out!"

"Mr. Chekov, shall I call Mr. Scott to the bridge?" Uhura said, knowing that Scott was very experienced in situations like this.

"No, it's not necessary," Chekov replied with an uncertain tone to his voice, "but inform him of our situation, just to be safe."

"Aye, Mr. Chekov," Uhura said, giving a quiet smile to Chekov, who returned it.

On another part of the Enterprise, namely Dr. Peterson's and Mr. Ruty's sleeping quarters, Dr. Peterson was in the final stages of preparing his plan.

"Roger, you go to the transporter room and immobilise any officers there, and wait for me. Also remember to prepare two field suits with gear," said Peterson as he quickly arranged the beds to look as if they were occupied.

"Doctor, where are we going?" Ruty asked.

"Down there. I want to know what's going on with Kirk. Anyway, it's far too dangerous to stay on a warring ship and we're not even military men; it's a lot safer down there. We could call any passing ship to pick us up from the station."

"Are you crazy? We could get caught by those four-armed aliens, or even get lost. It's a big planet, you know," protested Ruty strongly; he was not happy about Peterson's ideas.

"Suits me. You can stay here and sign your own death warrant!" said Peterson sharply, trying for the last time to persuade Ruty to change his mind.

Ruty stared at Peterson's eyes for a moment, then turned away to think. "How long will you be?"

"Not long," replied Peterson, "but just make sure you're there!"

Kirk aimed a right hook to Tyyle's face, but only managed to sting him across his left cheek. Again Kirk attacked, this time striking his opponent in the chest and sending Tyyle back a couple of feet. By this time Kirk was almost out of breath, as he had thrown all his energy into that last punch, and Tyyle was slowly regaining his energies after being winded. Trying as he always did, Kirk threw another right hook at Tyyle, but this time the alien reacted quickly, parrying Kirk's blow, which sent the Human flying away from his intended target and into the crowd of Emarician officers who cheered Tyyle's actions loudly while they also booed the Earthman.

"Come on, Jim, hang in there!" McCoy said loudly, adding some defiance against the crowd's loud, anti-Human chants.

"You know, Doctor, the Captain stands very little chance of overcoming an opponent who has the greater physical advantage in many ways, and will not be easily exhausted," Spock calmly informed McCoy, who was now almost distraught over the Vulcan's lack of faith in his Captain.

"Not now, Spock, not now!" McCoy said angrily. "Right now I just hope the others have realised our situation and have the brains to call down the cavalry," he added. "I don't want to remain here mining dilithium for the rest of my life, knowing that I saw my friend being butchered before my very eyes."

Staring at the fight, Spock continued to talk to the Doctor. "From what the Captain said when he made ship contact, our chance of escaping is still good."

"Well, it had better be soon," McCoy said.

By now Kirk's mouth and lower cheeks were splattered with his own blood which was still dripping from his cut lips. Also his left jaw was badly bruised, and his uniform ripped at the seams on his right shoulder. He knew his chances of winning were very slim indeed, but he knew there could be a chance if he just held on a little longer.

"I see my victory is near," cried out Tyyle as he stopped to stare at Kirk's beaten face.

Kirk stared back tiredly. "I'm not finished yet," he replied as he tried to

catch his breath.

"Mr. Sulu, up ahead!" Saavik called out, seeing a figure standing next to a large monolith in the shadows ahead.

"Where?" Sulu looked sharply but could not see what he was supposed to.

"Just to your left, fifteen metres ahead," replied Saavik softly. Knowing that Saavik had exceptionally good eyesight like all her race, Sulu pulled out a pair of binoculars from his pocket. Quickly he adjusted the pitch angle and focus to where Saavik pointed, and as the bright, digital numbers met precisely in the lens' view, he clearly saw a moving object which looked as though it was struggling, yet not achieving anything.

"What could it be?" Sulu asked Saavik.

"I can't tell you unless I make a closer examination of the subject," replied Saavik with a strong hint of Spock in her, which Sulu noticed clearly.

Silent! yet quickly, Sulu and Saavik edged their way back to the platoon which was waiting patiently behind them.

"Ready men!" Sulu called out. "We're going to split up into three groups. Saavik, you take sixteen men with you and one officer with a phaser cannon. You'll move directly ahead and see what that thing is as you go. We'll cover your flank."

"Aye sir," replied Saavik.

"Hanson, are you all right to lead an assault team, as you know this area before us?" Sulu asked.

"Aye sir, I'm all right."

"Good, you take the flank covering Saavik's group until they get clear, then lead your seventeen officers around the perimeter, and destroy any defence lines leaving us a clear path. Use the other cannon as backup to ease things."

"I'll take the remaining seventeen and head for the main entrance. Saavik's team will back us up, and when Hanson's cleared the area, he'll move in and do whatever is necessary. Remember, it's your half pincer movement in a guarded perimeter. Got that?" Sulu said, hoping that he could pull it off. "Any questions?"

"What if one group is pinned down?" asked Hanson.

"Use communicators, signal the party that is closest and they'll try their best to help, assuming they're not in any difficulty themselves. Just try not to get caught in that situation. Okay, let's go!"

The three teams began to split up and executed Sulu's plan as ordered. Saavik moved ahead, Sulu took the right flank and Hanson took the left. It was like a full scale field battle.

Over fifteen miles from the station, two bright, shimmering, blue columns of light appeared in a rocky mountain area, in the forms of Dr. Peterson and Mr. Ruty.

"It's cold out here," complained Ruty, as he rubbed his hands together in a

natural reaction.

"Stop complaining, turn on the torch, and make sure you get a tricorder," replied Peterson sharply.

Saavik silently gestured in two directions, ordering the officers to split up as they neared the first objective, which was to investigate the figure near the stone monoliths. With their phasers drawn and ready, two groups of eight officers encircled the target and slowly moved in.

Saavik, who moved ahead on her own, suddenly called out, "Hold your fire, the target seems to have been already dealt with!" Moving closer she saw that it was the Emarician officer Throogue, who was gagged and tightly bound to one of the stones. "Lt. Saavik to Mr. Sulu."

"What is it, Lieutenant?" replied Sulu.

"We have found what the figure was up ahead. It appears to be Mr. Throogue."

"Keep a tight hold on him, we may need him. Sulu out!" Sulu then adjusted his communicator to Lt. Hanson's frequency. "Mr. Hanson, are you in position yet?"

"We're almost in position now, but there seem to be some large cubes in our way, about thirty of them to be exact," Hanson said as he began to approach.

"Don't worry about that now, fall into position, five metre spread," replied Sulu firmly.

"Psst!" Hanson called softly to one of the officers on his left. "Behind you, by the large, silver canister, two guards - take them out!"

Suddenly, before the Federation officer could act on Hanson's order, the two Emarician guards by the canister spotted him and acted quickly. Drawing their unusual weapons, the Emaricians fired; the Federation officer felt the full blast of their weapons, which sent him to hit the ground.

"Take cover!" exclaimed Hanson. "Get the phaser cannon out!" Crawling across the cold, dusty ground to behind one of the large rocks to shield himself, the officer carrying the phaser cannon quickly stood up and gave out a ten second blast with the large gun. Deadly red laser light instantly bathed the two Emarician targets, reducing their alien forms to nothing but a white, gaseous cloud which quickly blew away on the wind.

"Hey!" Hanson called out. "You were under orders not to kill!"

"But they hit Williams!"

Hanson turned to one of the guards who was looking at Williams' body. "How is he?"

"He's dead, sir," replied the officer, feeling for Williams' non-existent neck pulse.

Hanson then called out to some of the officers next to him. "If we start killing everyone, we'll have a war on our hands!"

"What do we do with his body, sir?" asked one of Williams' friends.

"We'll beam him back to the ship later," replied Hanson soberly. "Everybody

fall into attacking positions and keep a tight guard!" Hanson then signalled Cdr. Sulu. "Hanson to Sulu, we're in position now, and we've also lost a man."

"We copy, Lieutenant, stay put. Sulu out!"

As Kirk was roughly pushed against the fighting ring boundaries, an Emarician handed him a very unusual sword which had four short spikes protruding from the tip and the hilt. Then Kirk was pushed back into the centre of the ring by the spectators, who were waiting for blood to be spilt. Tyyle was armed with a similar weapon, which put Kirk at a disadvantage because by the way he wielded it Tyyle was obviously accustomed to the sword.

"Come on, Captain Kirk, prepare to die!" Tyyle said with a humorous tone to his voice, knowing that he would easily win this fight. Suddenly he lunged towards Kirk with his sword. With split second timing and his Starfleet training, Kirk parried Tyyle's attacking blow to the head. Again the crowd cheered - an echoing cacophony of sound; laughter, mixed with the extreme anger of men who saw that victory would not be as easily achieved as they had expected.

"The entrance is clear, Lieutenant!" called out one of the young ensigns.

"Right," replied Saavik as she made her way to the building's main doorway. "Bring the prisoner here," she then ordered. As Saavik met Throogue face to face she looked at him sternly and spoke softly. "What is the true purpose of your mission?"

"We have no mission. Commander Tyyle was our war commander back home on our planet Zymoree. Now we are a pirate vessel."

"Where is your planet situated?" Saavik asked curiously.

"I am not at liberty to disclose that information."

"I understand. What has your Commander done to be placed in this situation?"

"I heard from my comrades that Tyyle tried to assassinate the government head of our Emarician Empire, and he escaped on our ship. Now he seeks to control the Empire by looking for better energy resources." Throogue hesitated, then looked at the ground in shame at his own weakness. "I - indeed, many of us - would like to return home."

"And that's why you attacked the Excelsior for its crystals. Have you or any of your crew ever attempted to stop him?"

"No. The ship's crew is getting to like his ideas more and more, and they will do anything he tells them. Once there was none more loyal than I. Now... Now I no longer trust him, but alone, how can I stand against him?"

"Is that your only reason?"

"There is another reason. We dare not defy him. He has fellow conspirators on our home planet. He has planned this well. You see, if I or any on the ship try to overthrow him, he will signal his colleagues and they will exterminate our families."

Saavik's eyes widened slightly. "Circumstances have changed. What would you do now?" she asked carefully.

"Try to win back the support of my fellow officers, and prevent him from sending any signals to his comrades. This will allow us to overthrow him." Throogue looked hopefully at Saavik.

"How do I know I can trust your story?" Saavik asked.

"I cannot prove it, as I have no conclusive evidence."

Saavik turned to the officers around her. "Let's move on." She then pointed to two officers nearest to her. "You two cover the entrance. It appears to be unguarded at the moment. Keep a wide perimeter guard." Saavik then pulled out her communicator and signalled Cdr. Sulu, reporting her situation. "Saavik to Mr. Sulu, we are in position and waiting for your arrival."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Stay there, we'll be with you in a minute. Has Hanson's group rendezvoused with you yet?" Sulu asked, concern in his voice.

Saavik looked around. "Yes, I see him and his men coming into position to our left." Hanson quickly hand-signalled to Saavik that he was now ready. Just after Hanson appeared Sulu arrived on the opposite side from him, with Saavik in the centre. The three groups met at the main entrance to the mining station.

"Any idea what those things are?" Sulu said, looking back at the huge cubes which were neatly lined up near the exit.

"Negative, Mr. Sulu. They don't appear to have any specific function," replied Saavik.

Sulu walked up to Saavik's Emarician prisoner until they met head to chest. "What is the function of these large cubes?" he asked bluntly.

"They are prison cells," replied Throogue straightforwardly. "And yes, they are occupied by your comrades from the other vessel. They still live, but it is impossible for them to escape."

"Right, it's time for action. Remember, phasers on stun," Sulu ordered. Quietly and yet swiftly, Sulu's small army flowed into the main entrance and quickly dispersed in different directions.

Sulu activated his tricorder, following the lifeform readings by listening to the bleeps, which increased gradually as he came closer to the source.

"Saavik, you take the left flank, Hanson, you take the right. See those two guards at twelve o'clock, twenty metres ahead?" Sulu pointed as he spoke softly, so as not to let his voice echo. "Let's see if you can take them out. Saavik, the one on the left is yours, Hanson, the one on the right." Immediately, the two officers moved, leaving the little Oriental officer to move ahead towards the intended victims.

With a quick blast from Saavik's phaser, one of the Emarician guards fell to the floor with a loud thud, which in turn took the other guard's attention.

"Saavik, watch out!" Hanson warned quickly as the other guard suddenly made her a target for extermination. Before Saavik could fire, Hanson's phaser accomplished what she would have done.

"Mr. Sulu!" Saavik called out softly. "Over here!"

"What is it?" Sulu replied.

"Through that large doorway, there seems to be something unusual happening. Can you hear it?" Saavik said, hoping that they were almost at their goal.

Sulu looked at both Hanson and Saavik carefully. "Shall we take a closer look?" Silently the three officers carefully crept to a set of steel blue coloured doors just ten metres ahead of them.

"We've got to open it just a little without anyone on the other side noticing," Sulu said as he tried to figure out the security door combination lock.

Saavik gave Sulu a questioning look. "The only way to open the doors 'just a little' is to break the automatic door circuit and work from within the mechanism, opening it manually."

"Well, get to it, Lieutenant, and make sure you don't trip the wrong code." Sulu then looked at Hanson. "Check around the other sides for possible exits, while I call the others to meet at this point."

"Aye sir," acknowledged Hanson.

After six minutes of waiting, a small army of Starfleet officers gathered at the doors Saavik was still working on.

"Hanson, have all the alien guards been immobilised?" Sulu asked.

"Yes, there were about twenty on guard and all are safely under wraps," Hanson replied.

"I think I've got it," Saavik reported suddenly.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Sulu commended. "Right, men, this is it. After we pass through these doors it could be a full scale battle, though I hope that doesn't happen." Sulu then looked at Hanson. "Hanson, when we get inside, take some men and try to set up a perimeter block whilst I search for the Captain. Saavik will provide backup."

"Ready, sir," Saavik said.

"Okay, charge up the phaser cannons." Sulu then pointed to two officers closest to the door. "You two open it slowly."

Silently the two young officers pulled the doors apart. They made a slight screeching noise when they opened, and the officers could feel their nerves tingling, as though the heat of the moment was overcoming them. As the heavy doors parted, loud noises and bright lights could be seen and heard coming from the other side. Sulu then placed his right eye to the narrow opening for a better view of the situation, but all he could see were the backs of Emarician officers in the distance.

"What now, Mr. Sulu?" Saavik questioned.

"Where's our prisoner?" Sulu asked, ignoring Saavik's question.

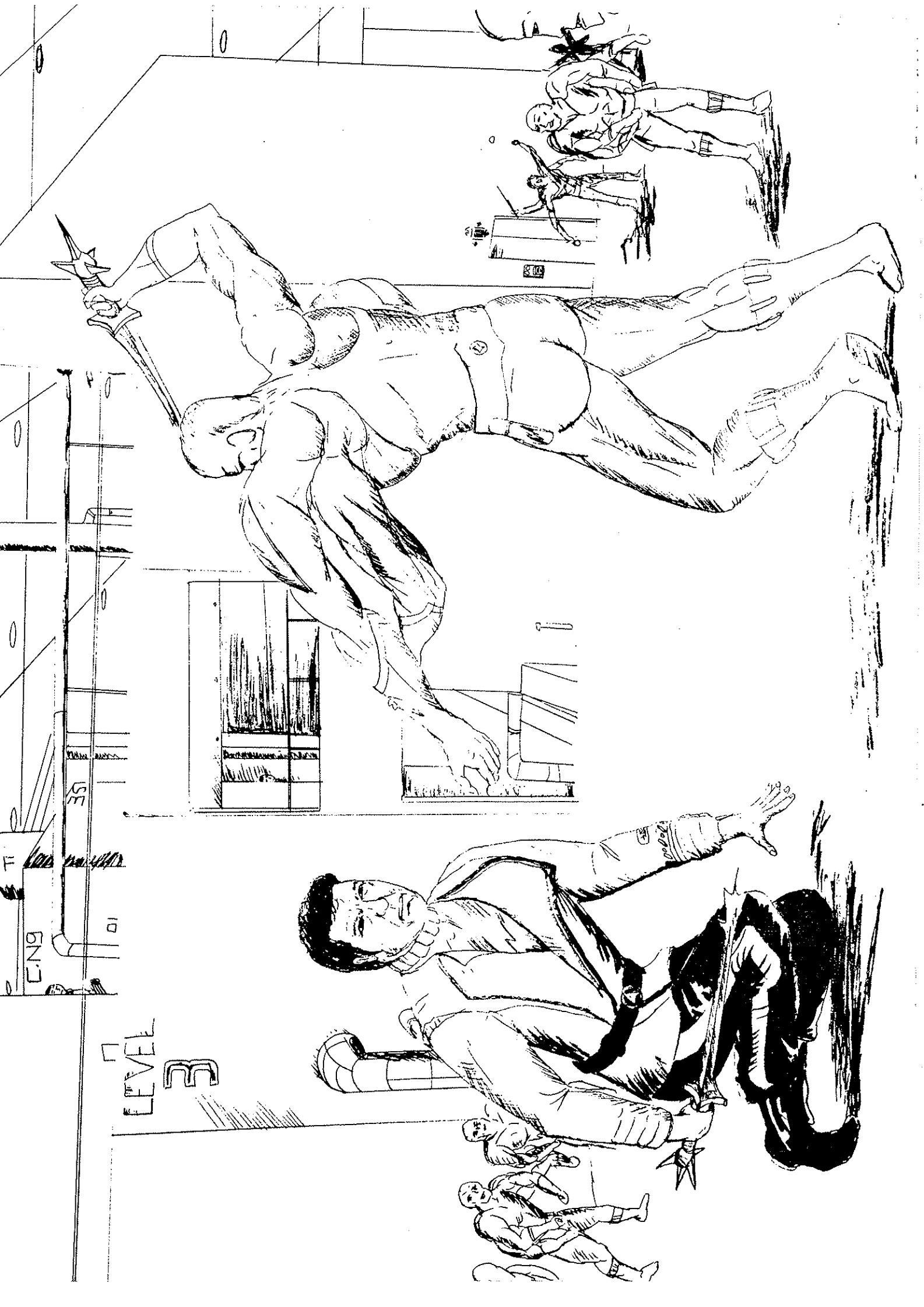
"He's outside under heavy guard, sir," Hanson replied.

"Get him here. I have a plan!"

In the centre of the station the fight was still continuing.

"Hang on, Jim!" McCoy called out.

"Doctor," Spock said quietly, "we must try to find a way out."



LEVEL 3

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USE

"How? We've got nothing to work with."

"Yes, we have, Doctor. I believe Mr. Sulu is nearby," Spock replied, relying on his own judgement.

In the centre of the ring, Kirk was rapidly tiring as Tyyle continued to lunge at him with his sword, while he parried its lethal thrusts.

"Come on, Captain, you're too easy a target for me," Tyyle said as he dropped his weapon to the floor. Kirk did likewise. As the Human dropped the sword, he could feel some of his energy coming back, because just carrying the weapon's weight drained him. Kirk fell to his knees as he tried to take a quick breather, but unknown to him, Tyyle was slowly edging his way towards him, ready for the kill.

Suddenly Tyyle made a running jump at Kirk's exhausted, battered body. Kirk knew it was coming; and precise timing worked for him, as Tyyle hit the empty floor where his intended victim should have been. Slowly Kirk stood up and limped his way to the injured Tyyle, and held out his hand in friendship. He knew Tyyle was a very deceptive person, which was why he was ready for anything, and holding out his hand was a risk he had to take. The fish took the hook, and Kirk quickly countered Tyyle's attacking punch, returning a fast hard kick to the side of Tyyle's armoured suit.

Unknown to any of the Emarician officers, Throogue was coming through the main entrance. Slowly he edged through the crowd of his shipmates in order to get to the centre of the Emarician battle ring.

"Commander Tyyle!" Throogue called loudly over the screams and chants that reached his ears.

"You have returned in one piece," Tyyle responded as he stopped fighting.

Kirk too was astonished at Throogue's appearance, feeling that his own crew had failed to hold him captive. Styles, Spock and McCoy also stared at Throogue, who looked healthy and unaffected by exhaustion. Spock still had his suspicions about Sulu, and looking at Throogue's expression, he knew there was something big being planned.

"Well, Captain Kirk, it seems your ship's crew have failed to hold my First Officer for long. It shows how pathetic your people are!" Tyyle taunted, but Kirk said nothing.

Overhead on the large latticework of steel balconies surrounding the crowds below, Starfleet officers armed with state of the art weaponry quickly took up their strategic firing positions. Saavik and Hanson assumed their firing positions, as did Sulu, who was about to make a standing introduction on their war lines.

Suddenly there was a phaser shot which echoed through the room, attracting all the Emarician and Starfleet officers' attention.

"Who was that?" called Tyyle angrily.

"Me!" said a small voice from the back of the crowd of aliens. All the Emaricians turned in the direction of the voice with their weapons at the ready, only to find a lone, small, Oriental Earthman walking towards them, with his phaser in his right hand. Slowly the crowd parted like the Red Sea to let Sulu approach.

"You pathetic dolt!" Tyyle said as Sulu slowly advanced. "Do you think just one Human can take on the might of an Emarician army?" Tyyle's officers began to laugh loudly at their commander's remark.

"Who said I was alone? If you haven't happened to notice, on the balconies above I have officers surrounding this whole area!" Sulu said confidently.

"You're bluffing!" Tyyle replied.

Sulu then pulled out his communicator. "Show this bozo we mean business!"

An officer carrying a phaser cannon gave a ten second blast from his gun. The shots just narrowly missed the heads of the soldiers below. Instead they pulverised a large titanium pipe which quickly collapsed to the ground, making a loud, echoing, shattering crash.

The Emarician officers scattered as the pipe shattered into large metal shrapnel. This gave the Emarician guards below a chance to return fire as they headed for cover. This time all three cannons fired, followed by a hail of small phasers, and again the aliens returned fire, hitting some of their opponents.

Kirk, Sulu, Spock, McCoy and Styles quickly headed for cover behind a large pipe as a small war erupted.

"What kept you, Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"When we found that Spock had been captured we had to change our tactics."

"Do you have a spare phaser?" Kirk asked, hoping that he did.

"Of course, sir. I've three spares with me."

"Try and hold the fort while I find Tyyle - he seems to have disappeared from sight," Kirk said as he dodged the hail of phasers to the exit. In the centre of the area, the exchanging phaser fire was like a bombfire, as different coloured lights passed through the air in straight line patterns.

"What now, Spock?" McCoy questioned the Vulcan harshly; he was afraid to stick his head out into the open, knowing that it would get blown off.

"We have to move, we can't stay here for long!" Spock shouted over the loud echoing noises which reverberated in the main station area.

The Vegan night was cold and windy as Kirk forced his way against the wind in his desperate search for Cdr. Tyyle. Suddenly, from the corner of his eye, Kirk saw a figure moving towards him from behind one of the large cubes, and he made a rolling jump out of the weapon's firing path.

"Halt!" Kirk called, as he had a clear shot at his target. Suddenly the alien turned and fired, missing Kirk's head by inches. With pinpoint accuracy, Kirk fired, hitting the Emarician squarely in the chest, sending him flying through the air. Kirk quickly walked up to his motionless victim, hoping that it was Tyyle. When he reached the body which was facing downwards, he turned it over. It was not Tyyle, as he had hoped. Another Emarician officer ran past him at a distance - this one he recognised clearly, because as he moved he limped on his left leg where Kirk had last hit him in the fight.

"Stop, Tyyle, it's over!" Kirk exclaimed.

"No, Captain Kirk, the game isn't over yet!" Tyyle said, as he ceased running and headed for Kirk.

"We end it here!" Kirk demanded. Suddenly Tyyle dropped his guns, as did Kirk, and again they began to battle hard with their fists.

On the other side of the station Saavik was lying half dead on the floor.

"Saavik!" McCoy cried out, seeing her body lying face down. Quickly running to her, the Doctor carefully turned her face upwards, and made a quick diagnosis with his medical scanner. "There's still a weak pulse," he muttered to himself. "If only I had the right equipment."

"Watch out, Doc, behind you!" exclaimed an officer standing near him, wielding a hefty cannon strapped to his shoulder. McCoy quickly looked behind, only to see an Emarician being vapourised by the phaser cannon's power.

"Thanks," replied McCoy. "Here, help me move Saavik out of the way."

"What happened to her, Doc?" asked the officer.

"It appears she was struck on her back by a large object." McCoy pointed out a square steel tube lying across the floor. "That must have hit her; and there is quite a bit of bleeding too."

In another part of the station the battle was slowly quietening down.

"Sulu to Hanson!" Sulu hailed on his communicator. "They're falling back, we already have a few that have surrendered. How are things at your end?"

"Fine," Hanson replied. "We're pushing them back; we've had a few casualties, but on the whole, we're winning."

"Sulu to Saavik," Sulu then spoke again, hoping to get a message from her. "Sulu to Saavik, come in!" McCoy heard the high-pitched bleep emanating from Saavik's belt pack. Quickly he removed the communicator from her belt and spoke.

"McCoy here, Sulu, Saavik's been hurt badly."

"What happened, Doctor?" Sulu questioned.

"I don't really know for sure that it's what I thought," McCoy said, leaving Sulu slightly confused. "Anyway, have you seen the Captain?"

"I saw him not long ago chasing Tyyle," replied Sulu.

"What the hell is going on? It's like a God-damned circus act!" McCoy said, then hurriedly closed the communicator.

Outside in the cold night Kirk was hard at work saving his own neck, in a battle for supremacy and honour against the might of the Emarician Commander Tyyle.

"I must hand it to you, Captain, you are a man who keeps his bargains!" Tyyle said, as he repeatedly tried to hit Kirk in the face with two arms but missed.

"And I must say, Tyyle, you are a cheat and a thing of poor, inhumane ideas," Kirk said in response to Tyyle's remark.

Suddenly Kirk was caught off guard as Tyyle's two fists met his face and stomach. Moving with great haste to end his personal vendetta, Tyyle made for the closest rock he could find so he could use it to crush Kirk's head. But he was unsuccessful; Kirk just barely dodged as the rock smashed against the ground.

Kirk picked up the same rock which Tyyle had used against him and tried to throw it back at him.

"Eat this!" he shouted fiercely at Tyyle. The small rock, thrown with great effort, just smashed against Tyyle's legs, and felled him like an old oak tree.

"Damn you to death, Kirk!" Tyyle said as he lay crouched on the ground, holding his right leg which was bleeding yellow. Exhausted, Kirk slowly dragged himself to where Tyyle was lying in a small puddle of blood, which meandered away along the ground.

"Do you admit defeat?" Kirk said to Tyyle, who was lying on the ground in great pain, though his voice did not betray that pain.

"Never!" Tyyle shouted viciously. "Neither of us is dead yet, but it looks like you have finally lost, Captain." Gradually moving one of his right hands to his right leg boot without Kirk noticing, Tyyle pulled out a small, five inch long rod and aimed it directly at Kirk's head. "Goodbye, Captain Kirk!" Tyyle said with an angry smile on his face.

Suddenly, before Kirk's very eyes, Tyyle's form disappeared in a bright red light which emanated from Spock's hand phaser.

"Jim, are you all right?" Spock said with concern for Kirk's physical condition.

"Yes, you couldn't have come at a better time," Kirk replied.

"Why, Captain? What was going to happen which you would enjoy?"

Kirk just laughed at Spock's last remark. "Here, give me a hand up," he said, stretching out his hand for Spock's assistance. "Anyway, how have we done?" he asked.

"We've captured most of them."

Slowly Kirk walked away towards one of the station's entrances, aided carefully by his First Officer.

"Captain, it looks as though they have all surrendered; even the officers on the ship have signalled their defeat," reported one of Kirk's officers.

"That sounds like good news," Kirk responded as he turned his head to search around for a certain Emarician. "Where's Throogue?"

"He's with the other half of the prisoners outside," Spock replied.

"Bring him here, I want to talk to him," said Kirk as he began to look around the large steel structure of the station.

After a minute or two of waiting, Throogue came through the door, escorted closely by Spock and another guard. As they stopped face to face with Kirk, Spock dismissed the guard from Throogue's side.

"Do you know how to free the others from those prison cubes?" said Kirk to Throogue.

"Yes, I will do it, since I am already at your mercy."

"We don't treat people like slaves, we've learned to forget those times," Kirk said with pride in his words and his voice.

"What will become of us, then?" asked Throogue suddenly.

"You will be sent back to your home planet and..." Kirk said.

"You don't understand. Once we reach home, we could face trial and see our families killed, under Commander Tyyle's orders," Throogue said worriedly.

"Yes, but who is there to implicate you or your families, now that Tyyle is dead? And yes, I do know your full situation - Commander Sulu told me. You see now that Tyyle is gone, his crew cannot be blamed for his actions on the planet before he left, thus your families will be safe. You can return home!"

Kirk's words took Throogue emotionally as he turned around to think about what the Human had said. "Yes, I agree," Throogue answered, "but first we must free your friends."

Suddenly Sulu came up to Kirk with a message. "Captain, we seem to have miscounted the Emarician officers, and one of them is outside with two civilian hostages."

"Who could they be?" Kirk said curiously. "Civilian? How can you tell, Sulu?"

"They were not wearing Starfleet uniforms," Sulu replied.

Outside in the dark, three silhouettes stood in the distance; two were side by side while a tall third one was standing behind them.

"Stay as you are, Captain, or I will destroy them!" replied the large shadow as Kirk appeared.

"Who have you got with you?" Kirk said, choosing his words carefully.

"Who I've got is not important, that I have them is!" replied the shadow harshly.

Throogue suddenly stepped forward. "You may release them now, our battle is over."

"How can I be sure Tyyle is dead?" said the silhouette.

"I killed him," Spock said.

"You lie! He must have escaped and warned his comrades on our planet about us!"

"He means to kill us," said one of the other smaller shadows.

"Dr. Peterson?" Kirk said curiously, recognising the distinctive voice. "Is that Ruty with you?"

"Yes, it is," Peterson replied.

Suddenly the tall shadow pushed both Peterson and Ruty to the ground and pulled out his weapons.

"Traitor!" said the hidden Emarician officer, about to shoot at any target in front of him.

But Kirk fired first, already having his phaser in his hand, stunning the alien.

"I'm sorry," apologised Kirk.

"It was necessary. He fought for what he believed in, as all our kind

should," Throogue said softly with a sad tone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

On the Enterprise bridge life was jubilant again, as all were glad to be alive and well after the Emarici ordeal.

Sulu was once again at his old seat at the helm, as was Chekov at his weapons console. Spock sat in the command chair while Kirk was away discussing diplomatic terms with Throogue on the Emarician ship Amari. The Excelsior was still finishing off the final touches to the repairs before it could embark to the nearest starbase for a full overhaul. All was well, yet deep scars were left on some people's lives as they saw their friends badly injured or killed during the confrontation.

"Mr. Sulu!" Spock called out.

"Aye sir!" replied Sulu with a smile.

"Take the con. I'll be in sickbay."

"Are you all right, Mr. Spock?" Sulu said with some concern.

"I am well; I am just going to see somebody."

Sulu knew immediately who it was he was about to visit. He also knew that Spock cared for the girl he had looked after ever since he'd found her on that barren waste of a planet with a name that truly suited it.

The Enterprise and the Excelsior slowly orbited the planet Delta Vega. On the opposite side of the planet a historic meeting was now coming to an end on the Emarician battleship the Amari, which was now fully visible for all to see. It was twice the length of the Enterprise, and its smooth, silvery, cigar-shaped hull glistened brightly against the neighbouring red Vegan star.

In a small room, highly decorated with gold coloured metal strips on all four walls, Kirk was still in discussion with the new commander of this ship about diplomatic affairs.

"Well now, Mr. Throogue - or should I say Commander Throogue? - this has been a good meeting. When you or your people are ready to make yourselves fully known, you are welcome to join our Federation," said Kirk happily, feeling that things had turned out for the best on both sides.

"I am flattered by your generous offer, Captain Kirk. We will consider your offer very carefully, and I do wish it could be very soon," said Throogue softly. "First I must take this ship and the crew back home to Zymoree, to clear our names and free our kin of the burdening threats that have been laid upon us."

"What of Tyyle's friends, who have sworn to massacre your families?" Kirk said, feeling he knew what the outcome would be.

"At heart they will also be glad of Tyyle's death, for it means that their names will not be connected to the attempted overthrow of our world's government," replied Throogue as he was about to hand Kirk another drink.

"What of you? Thank you," Kirk said as he took the small, metal cup from Throogue's lower right hand. "How will you or your government deal with your situation?"

"I will say we were forced into doing Tyyle's bidding by his death threats, or as you people call it, blackmail," Throogue answered Kirk's question.

"Anyway, I hope you make it through your problems," Kirk said as he placed his empty cup on the table just to his left.

"I see you are anxious to return to your ship, so I will not keep you any longer, Captain," said Throogue. "One of my officers will escort you to the transportation centre." Kirk quickly shook hands with Throogue for the last time and left, following one of the ship's personnel.

In the Enterprise sickbay, life was not quite the same as when the mission began. This time all the beds were occupied by injured officers from the Delta Vega battle.

While the rest of the ship's officers were taking a rest, McCoy was hard at work doing what he always did best, arguing with his nurse and saving lives.

In one of the beds lay Saavik, who had been a victim of a slight structural accident on the planet. According to Dr. McCoy, she had been lucky to survive because a small piece of shrapnel had just missed her heart by a few centimetres when a large, metal column had exploded and come crashing down behind her.

Gradually Dr. McCoy came closer and closer to her bed as he continued to inspect each patient in turn. Finally reaching her bedside, McCoy smiled and looked at her biological readings on the monitor just above her head.

"Your blood pressure is just about normal for any Vulcan or Romulan. Your respiratory rate is fine, and your wounds and burns are slowly healing," said McCoy, quickly reporting the news to her.

"When will I be able to continue my work?" Saavik asked softly.

"You're very persistent, like your teacher Spock," replied McCoy. "He seems to have a great influence on you, Lieutenant... Anyway, you should be out in a day or two," he said. Suddenly he noticed Spock entering the surgery. "Talking about Spock, here he comes." Saavik quickly looked as if she was in disgrace as he came closer, dodging the nurses.

"Doctor," said Spock, his usual, unemotional self.

"Well, Spock, what brings you to these unsightly depths?" McCoy said, knowing full well why he had come.

"How is she, Doctor?" asked Spock concernedly.

"She'll be out in a couple of days. All we've got to do is to run a few tests," McCoy replied.

"Doctor, don't you have other patients to attend to who are in far more need of your medical experience than this Lieutenant?" said Spock.

In reaction to Spock's statement, McCoy's face began to glow red with anger. "This is my department, Spock; I choose who I feel needs medical attention or advice, regardless of their physical condition."

"Really, Dr. McCoy, you must learn to control your temper. I suggest you try..." replied Spock, ignoring McCoy's fuming temper.

"Five minutes, Spock, no more!" said McCoy, as he quickly turned around to see another patient.

"Lieutenant, are you well?" Spock said.

"I am, and I wish to apologise for my lack of awareness. I know I should have looked carefully but I became confused," Saavik replied, looking down in disgust at her performance.

"There is no need to apologise, it could have happened to anyone, even me. It's just that your senses were over-pressured by other happenings, that your mind became confused about which problem you should tackle first. I suggest you meditate for a short period to help your healing process," Spock said, applying his well-known logic to the cause of her problem.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock, I now fully understand the logic of my situation," replied Saavik thankfully to Spock's kind advice.

"I must take my leave now, Lieutenant. May you regain good health speedily," said Spock before he left silently.

Just as Spock left, another of Saavik's friends entered, this time with a bright smile to cheer her up.

"Hi there, Saavik, how are you?" said Robin Watson, who had just beamed over from her ship to see her.

"I am quite well, thank you. How are you after your unusual accident?" replied Saavik.

"I'm great, thank you. The Doc over there let me go a while back, and it looks like it's your turn now to take his punishment," said Robin as she quickly glanced at the Doctor, who in turn stared back before turning back to his patient.

"Why am I to receive punishment from the Doctor who is supposed to save lives?" asked Saavik with a curious glance at Robin.

"I was only talking metaphorically," Robin replied with a laugh. "Anyway, thanks for keeping me company in sickbay a while back."

"I did it for friendship and medical reasons," replied Saavik.

Robin picked up Saavik's limp left hand and grasped it tightly. "Take care, kiddo. Unfortunately I can't stay, my ship's preparing to leave soon." Saavik could feel Robin's hand gripping tightly as though she did not want to let go.

"It's been a long time, and it looks as though time must go on to control our destinies." Saavik then raised her right hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper."

"Same to you," replied Robin, as she released Saavik's hand and left silently.

The transporter room shone brightly as a bright, pale blue column of light slowly faded away to reveal the outline of a Human form. Near the base of the transporter platform stood Spock as he waited for the return of his beloved Captain Kirk.

"Welcome back aboard, Captain," said Spock in a formal, military manner.

"Thank you, Spock," replied Kirk as he stepped off the platform. "How are things going?"

"Very well, Captain. We'll be preparing to break out of orbit in half an hour."

"And what of Dr. Peterson and his crony?"

"They're staying on the U.S.S. Excelsior until Captain Styles reaches the nearest Starbase to effect full repairs," replied Spock, knowing Kirk was relieved at their absence from his ship. Swiftly both senior officers exited the transporter room and headed for the nearest turbolift.

As they entered the lift, Kirk spoke to the computer, "Deck five." The lift zoomed off to its ordered destination. "Anyhow, Spock, it looks as though things have turned out for the best - don't you think so?"

"Indeed it does, Captain, most of our puzzles have been solved," replied Spock.

"Well, those other mysteries will have to wait; for now I need a clean up. I'll be in my quarters." The turbolift came to a halt at Kirk's desired level. "I'll see you on the bridge afterwards. Maybe we could have a game of chess later on?"

"I will be looking forward to that," replied Spock. As the doors opened, Kirk left quickly, leaving Spock to continue on to the bridge.

In Kirk's cabin the air was still, and the atmosphere was similar to that of an old church on a quiet day. As he came to rest in a seated position on the end of his bed, he began to relax and lay down on his back, looking up to the ceiling light. After looking at the light for only a few minutes, he felt his eyelids becoming heavy. Trying to prevent himself from dozing off any further, he quickly sat up again and stretched, giving a small, inaudible yawn.

"Damn!" Kirk lightly cursed himself as he tried to stay awake. He began to remove his tunic, ripping apart the velco lining on the right side of his chest so he could ready himself for a quick shower.

"Status report, Mr. Sulu?" ordered Spock as he took over from Sulu in the centre seat.

"All systems are functioning normally. We will be ready to break out of orbit soon," replied Sulu.

"Very good, Mr. Sulu," Spock replied.

Suddenly Mr. Scott alighted from the turbolift and walked up to the engineering station. "Well, Mr. Spock, are we still planning to take a little jaunt through space?" he asked in a merry tone.

"That's for the Captain to decide," replied Spock. Again the portside turbolift doors opened, and this time Dr. McCoy came out, looking exhausted from his strenuous work.

"What brings you up here, Doctor?" Spock said, repeating what McCoy had said to him in sickbay.

"A breath of fresh air, Mr. Spock," McCoy replied. "It smells like a blasted abattoir down there!"

"You know, what we need, Doctor, is a good rest," said Mr. Scott.

"I couldn't agree with you more, Scotty," McCoy quickly agreed. "Oh, Mr.

Spock, you'll be pleased to hear that Saavik will be out earlier than expected. She seems to heal fast."

"What about you, Mr. Spock, do you need a rest?" Scott asked, knowing what his answer would be.

"It is not necessary for me to rest as I do not tire easily."

The starboard side turbolift doors parted, and Kirk entered the bridge, looking healthy and fresh but a little scarred on the forehead.

"Well, gentlemen, how are we today?" Kirk called out to the three senior officers who were talking amongst themselves.

"Same as always, tired and worn out," replied McCoy openly.

"Captain, we'll be ready to leave orbit soon, all systems are functioning and operating normally," said Spock formally.

"Glad to hear it, Spock, it's not every day I get a ship that works and runs properly," replied Kirk jokingly. Scott turned to Kirk and pulled a face at his remark. "No offence, Scotty."

"Aye sir, I know you never meant it. There are quite a few changes around which have helped." Scott smiled.

"Lt. Uhura, patch me through to the Excelsior bridge," said Kirk.

"Aye sir, putting you through to Captain Styles," Uhura replied as she quickly set her communication channel to the Excelsior bridge control.

"This is Captain Kirk to U.S.S. Excelsior. What is your status?"

"Captain Styles here. Our condition is just about satisfactory. Dr. Peterson is helping to put the ship's sensors and scanners in order. We'll make it in time to Starbase 17 on impulse power," replied Styles.

"We'll be warping out of orbit in ten minutes, so good luck, Captain," replied Kirk in relief, as Uhura closed the channel.

"Captain, a signal is trying to come in through the monitor," said Uhura suddenly as she saw the strange readings on the subspace comm. net monitor just above her head.

"Patch it through to the main screen," Kirk ordered. Static lines appeared then disappeared, revealing the face of Commander Throogue.

"Greetings once again, Captain. It seems your offer of this Federation of yours has been taken into consideration by our government, from whom we have just received a reply. I hope this is good news," replied Throogue calmly. "Our co-ordinates, if you wish to locate our planet, will be fed into your computer."

"Thanks for the invitation!" replied Kirk happily. Throogue's face disappeared from the main viewing screen which reverted to the view of space. "Well, what would you suggest, Spock?"

"Proceed with our mission," replied Spock.

"Dr. McCoy?" Kirk said, asking for his personal opinion.

"I prescribe rest for the day. One adventure is enough for the moment," answered McCoy.

Kirk then looked at Scott, but said nothing. "Just give the word, Captain!" Scott answered, knowing what the Captain's response would be.

"Mr. Scott, the word is given." Suddenly the eyes of all three senior officers were fixed on Kirk's face. "Set course for Starbase 4." Suddenly the whole bridge echoed with the sound of cheering officers. "I'm sorry, Spock, but as McCoy would say, 'It's just what the Doctor ordered.' Warp five, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye sir, warp five," repeated Sulu as he slowly pushed the thruster throttle forward, and in that instant the Enterprise left orbit, levelling in a long, colourful trail of light.

