

The Breaking of the Bridge

Posted originally on the [Ad Astra :: Star Trek Fanfiction Archive](http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/679) at <http://www.adastrafanfic.com/works/679>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Star Trek: The Original Series
Character:	Matt Decker , James T. Kirk , Gary Mitchell , Will Decker , Ensemble Cast - TOS , Original Character(s)
Additional Tags:	Action/Adventure , Intrigue , Mental Health Issues , Character Study , Missing Scene , TOS S02E06: The Doomsday Machine
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of Creatures in the Stars
Stats:	Published: 2023-07-14 Completed: 2023-08-05 Words: 82,195 Chapters: 17/17

The Breaking of the Bridge

by [ChrisQ](#)

Summary

Matt Decker and Jim Kirk averted one doomsday when they were captain and first officer. Here follows the account of the actions, consequences, journeys, intrigues, and battles - personal, professional, and political - that led Decker and Kirk to their second fateful encounter with an indestructible alien superweapon: old acquaintances, new commands, lost loves, and the powerful emotions of grief and guilt that can drive men to madness.

Chapter 1

The *Merrimack* tore a swath of warped space across the Pegasi sector with a growing vibration already reminiscent of an earthquake-torn island. Stars flashed past on the main viewscreen so fast that to an unaccustomed eye, they might appear to streak past like laser beams. The cruiser's nacelles strained in their mounts to keep the ship moving at speed: and still it couldn't possibly fly fast enough.

Already the emergency call from the *Leonis* was an hour old, and yet to Matt Decker it felt as if he'd been hunched forward in the captain's chair for half a day. The savage ache in his back seemed to lessen every time he changed his posture, only to worsen again after a few minutes. The chronometer mounted between the helm and navigation board ticked the seconds by with agonizing slowness. It could be a trick of the high warp speed, or it could be that the *Leonis* was in dire straits and the *Merrimack* was the only ship close enough to render aid.

"Time to intercept," Decker said tersely.

"Less than four minutes now, sir." Peter Brent looked over his shoulder from the helm, but his face showed the same tension that strained between every living creature on the *Merrimack's* bridge. "We're still about six parsecs out from Dimidium."

"Mr. Skappas, plot a standard orbit," Decker nodded to the navigator. "Mr. Kirk, weapons status?"

James Kirk turned halfway from his station on the starboard side of the bridge with a snappy response. "Main phasers manned and ready, Captain. Photon torpedoes locked and loaded."

"Very well. Lieutenant L'Rema, anything further from the *Leonis*?"

The black-furred Caitian woman seated at the communications console had more of a growl than a purr to her voice as she responded. "Negative, Captain. No word since they reported the artillery strike on the planet's capitol district."

"And the *Yorktown*?"

"ETA ninety-three minutes."

"Estimate we'll reach standard orbit in two minutes, sir," Skappas called over his shoulder.

"Very well," Decker nodded. "Hold your course. Phasers stand by!" He punched the middle button on the right arm of the command chair and leant over the speaker, rubbing his chin. "Captain's log, Stardate One-one-five-seven point four. We have received a distress call from the U.S.S. *Leonis*, which has been in the Pegasi system attempting to broker a peace agreement between the recently contacted planets of Dimidium and Delta Pavonis. Although the Pavoni have petitioned for Federation membership, the Dimidians have proved much more reclusive and paranoid, and a particularly violent faction has threatened a hostile takeover of its government and an interplanetary missile launch against the Pavoni unless they withdraw their petition for membership in the Federation. The *Leonis* has reported an artillery strike in the vicinity of the Dimidian Sacrificial Spire and lost contact with its landing party. We are en route to render assistance."

Decker shut off the log recorder, arose from his chair and stepped up to the upper level of the bridge, leaning on the circular console beside Kirk. "You'd think a cultural observer would have reported interplanetary missile capability before we made first contact," he muttered.

"The thought occurred to me," Kirk nodded. "Of course, who's to say they didn't develop the capability after the fact."

Decker gave him a piqued stare. "What are you getting at?"

"Let's face it, Matt, not all of us are inclined to obey the Prime Directive as zealously as others," Kirk replied evenly. "It wouldn't come as a shock if the Pavoni had a little outside help in developing advanced weapons systems and the Dimidians got wind of it somehow, and opted to arm themselves."

"Hmm." Decker rubbed his chin and looked around the bridge, feeling the tension of his senior officers as palpably as he could see it. He had been looking around that same bridge for three years and feeling, seeing that same tension every time they went rushing in where angels feared to tread.

And yet, a glance around the bridge never missed the plaque affixed to the bulkhead beside the turbolift, never missed the name inscribed on the plaque and never failed to remind Decker of his ship's heritage. It had inherited the name of a ship that, inefficient and ineffective as it was by all accounts, had taken part in a revolution of naval warfare and technology. Itself built on the hull of a burnt wooden sailing ship, it had been transformed into a casemate ironclad renamed for the state of its rebirth, but still known throughout the annals of history by its original name - *Merrimack*.

In its menacing new and nearly invincible form, that clumsy, deep-drafted ironclad had written itself into the history books the day it destroyed two of its most powerful wooden adversaries. And yet the next day, it was itself checked by a diminutive enemy, another iron ship that further revolutionized sea power just as it revolved its own gun turret. Neither the *Merrimack* nor the *Monitor* had managed to inflict serious damage on each other in that legendary engagement, but the *Monitor* had bequeathed its name to every ship to follow in its design. And although the *Merrimack* was scuttled a mere two months after their confrontation, it, too, had eventually passed on its name to vessels that carried history on their decks and the future in their hulls.

The U.S.S. *Merrimack*, Naval Construction Contract No. 1344, was the second starship to bear the name. Spawned of the *Archer* class, with a standard saucer-shaped primary hull, its semicylindrical engineering section protruded from the rear of that hull and tapered into a shuttle hangar with a single vertical-track door. Built into the upper superstructure where the engineering section joined the primary hull, two angled pylons supported the monstrosously vibrating warp nacelles, projecting thirty meters above the saucer where the shield emitter could easily cover them.

Right now they strained in their mountings, fighting harder by the minute to hold the ship at its maximum speed of Warp 6.

Following the Federation and Klingon War several years earlier, the *Merrimack* had been tasked with peacekeeping patrols at the edges of Federation space, should another belligerent try to take advantage of the Federation's recovery efforts. And few newly contacted races had shown quite as much belligerency as the Dimidians. For the thousandth time, Decker wondered whose bright idea it was to send the *Leonis* to Dimidium alone. Rhys Sheffield was a good man, an effective commander, and most importantly, a fire eater - but even he couldn't devour the flames the Dimidians threatened to ignite. Decker had never taken the *Merrimack* into a major battle, but if this action should buck for a place in the history databanks, he swore his ship would not live down to the reputation of its unwieldy, underpowered namesake.

He eyed the main viewscreen. A yellowish-white star had become visible in the upper left corner, growing closer at an alarming rate, seemingly dead in the *Merrimack's* path as it rushed onward. He folded his arms and glanced at Kirk again. "Refresh my memory, willya? Recent history of this sector."

"Well, Fifty-one Pegasi was first observed by one of the old-style deep-space telescopes late in the twentieth century," Kirk related. "As exploration vessels passed near the system over the past hundred years or so, they picked up a great deal of radio traffic which led them to believe Dimidium was a political carnosaur, threatening force and violence against nearby planets. The nearest thing to a motive that our cultural observers picked up was expansionism - a desire to use force to dominate the entire sector."

Decker nodded slowly. "Napoleonic France, Nazi Germany, the Russian Federation, the Trump Supremacists, and now Dimidium. That message from the *Leonis* said the Gesikan faction had occupied an interplanetary missile base capable of launching two dozen Manticores at Delta Pavonis. What does that say to you?"

"Reports are vague, but the best estimation we have is that the Manticore warheads are armed with hydromonium phosphate cells. I don't think any Starfleet observer has ever seen the amount of damage they can do up close."

"So they have weapons of mass destruction and they're not afraid to use them. They want to rattle sabers, they could do with a little lesson from our own history." Decker pushed away from the console and returned to the captain's chair just as Skappas turned halfway in his seat.

"Less than a minute to Dimidium orbit now, Captain," he reported.

"Very well." Decker was on the verge of seating himself when he saw L'Rema arch her back, her tail twitching sharply from side to side - she only had such involuntary reactions when the news was singularly bad.

"I have a new message from the *Leonis*, sir!" she announced. "They report the Gesikan faction on Dimidium has launched another strike with high-yield rockets and destroyed the entire Sacrificial Oval. Captain Sheffield, First Officer Gavras and landing party...." L'Rema caught her breath, her pupils slitted and her tail tossing back and forth like a bullwhip. "All lost in the strike! The Gesikans are preparing to launch a Manticore at Delta Pavonis, they've already commenced a thirty-second countdown!"

"Damn them!" Decker snapped. He pounded one hand on the arm of his chair and leaned back into it, peering at the chronometer. "Thirty seconds!"

"Still forty until we reach orbit, sir," Skappas said grimly.

"Stand by the torpedoes! Jim, what's their missile capability, how far can it possibly get before we assume orbit?"

"Dimidium's gravity is only eighty percent of Earth's," Kirk answered. "By the time we reach orbit, we'll need all ten of those spare seconds to lock on before it breaks out of the atmosphere."

"I have the *Leonis* on sensors now, sir!" Brent called out. "He's headed away across the terminator. Range one point one AUs, closing fast!"

"Slow to warp two!" Decker ordered. "We don't need a collision at maximum speed. Forrester, get a set of eyes on the ground. When that missile fires off, I want to know about it before it makes smoke!"

"Yes, sir!" The young officer at the science panel shoved himself out of his chair and bent over the sensor viewer, trying to ignore the awl-like stare Kirk shot at him.

"L'Rema, open a hailing frequency," Decker said. He waited for an interminable second and reached out blindly for a pair of computer disks stacked on the arm of his chair, scuffing them between his fingers, trying to expend as much nervous energy as he could afford before L'Rema reported the hailing frequency open.

"*Merrimack* calling *Leonis*," Decker said. "This is Captain Decker speaking. What's your status?"

"This is - this is Lieutenant Odell, chief navigation officer." The voice sounded absurdly young, and on the edge of total panic. "The Dimidians have given us an ultimatum of one minute to break orbit and haul off. Captain, don't come any closer. These people are *armed and dangerous!*"

"Damn right they are, Lieutenant," Decker replied. "That's why we're here - to make sure the danger doesn't get off that planet. Stay your course, you understand? We're only a few seconds out!" Quickly he shut off the speaker and leaned forward in his chair. "Jim, time to missile launch?"

"Ten seconds left!" Kirk answered. "And still twenty until we're in orbit!"

"God, we'll never make it in time," Brent muttered under his breath.

Unfortunately for him, the mutter didn't escape Decker's ears. "None of that, Pete!" he said sharply. "Just hold your course and cut in impulse

power on my mark - "

"*Leonis* calling *Merrimack*! *Leonis* calling *Merrimack*!" Odell's voice in the speaker was high, excited and permeated with fear. "Mayday! We've taken an ion blast to our number one warp nacelle! Our warp drive is down and our phaser capacity is reduced to thirty-eight percent!"

"Stay calm, Mr. Odell," Decker said firmly. "We're almost in range!"

"Captain, I'm sorry, sir, but we've got to break orbit," Odell interrupted. "They've already destroyed our landing party and they'll kill us all if we stay!"

"I said, stay calm, and *do not* break orbit, Lieutenant!" Decker shouted. "Do not show weakness on behalf of this man's Starfleet!"

He spun halfway round as Forrester straightened up from the sensor viewer. "Sir, the Manticore is airborne!" he announced. "Less than a minute before it breaks into open space, coordinates....one four zero, zero nine zero, zero seven two!"

"Is the *Leonis* along its trajectory?" Kirk demanded.

"No, sir! It just passed clear."

Kirk jumped out of his chair and leaned on the handrail encircling the lower level of the bridge. "Captain, I respectfully request permission to beam aboard the *Leonis* and take command," he said forcefully.

Decker stared at him in surprise. "Jim, God forbid that missile has any special targeting programming - "

"Sir, listen to that man!" Kirk insisted. "He's scared absolutely witless! If we don't show our teeth to the Dimidians now, they'll hit us even harder next time! Two ships against one missile, sir, it's the only chance we have!"

Decker held his breath, but immediately shook himself for doing so. They had no time to argue the point - and even less after Forrester took another look into the sensor viewer.

"The missile's in the stratosphere, sir," he exhorted. "It'll miss us by less than a hundred meters."

"Slow to impulse!" Decker ordered. "Lock phasers! We'll blast it as it goes by!"

"*Captain....*" The fire burned in Kirk's eyes, the total lack of fear, the determination. As the *Merrimack* fell into high orbit, Decker jerked one thumb over his shoulder.

"Go," he said. "LaSalle and Mitchell will beam over with you. Don't leave the ship without them!" he shouted after Kirk as his first officer dashed for the turbolift. "L'Rema, get both those men to the transporter room on the double!"

He sat in the chair and eyed the main viewer. Dimidium now occupied most of the lower half of the screen, the *Leonis* barely visible just from the glow of its impulse thrusters: but the most eye-catching thing on the screen right now was the yellowish-white plume of gas spewing from the bottom of the Manticore as it shot toward outer space.

Odell barely restrained himself from crying out as the *Leonis* heaved under another impact. Both of the hits it had taken had come from astern: the number two nacelle, projecting alongside the secondary hull on a wide strut, had been knocked completely powerless. The second blast shook the ship just as violently, though not with as much whiplashing action as the first blast had. The lights flickered, an instrument panel on the port side of the bridge went dark, and another panel on the starboard side burst altogether, spraying sparks and spewing smoke. The unnerving buzz of electrical shorts accompanied a strobelike flashing of arcs from the access panel underneath the console.

"Another hit on number two nacelle!" the science officer shouted from behind him.

"Mr. Odell, severe casualties reported on decks seven and eight!"

"We're losing attitude control, sir!"

"Sir, that missile is breaking out of atmosphere! It may not even pass us before it alters its trajectory!"

As report after dire report piled on his shoulders, each one grimmer than the last, Odell bent his head, fist clenched on top of the helm. He had had temporary command of the *Leonis* before when Captain Sheffield and Commander Gavras were away on a ground mission, but he had always counted on them to come back. Sheffield had instilled in him a false sense of security by assuring him that the peace negotiations would be smooth, and he hadn't for one nanosecond anticipated that both captain and first officer would never come back alive. The thought of commanding the *Leonis* in a legitimate crisis had occurred to him, but he had never seriously considered it - until a minute ago, when the full, crushing, inescapable weight of command smacked him full in the face.

"I'm shifting to low orbit," he finally spoke to the navigator. "Captain Decker said not to break orbit, but he - "

All of a sudden the turbolift doors swished apart.

"Report, Mr. Odell!" Kirk bellowed as he strode out of the lift. "What's your situation?"

"My - " Odell spun around, searching desperately for words as Kirk, Gary Mitchell, and Hank LaSalle overran the bridge. "I - our - we're badly damaged, sir, and sustaining serious casualties!"

"Very well, I'm taking command," Kirk asserted. "Have you got enough power for a tractor beam?"

"Only enough, Commander," the science officer broke in. "But our phasers won't -"

"To hell with the phasers! Where's that missile?"

"About to pass dead astern! It'll cross our vector in less than three seconds!"

"Mr. Odell, tractor beam on that missile, *now!*" Kirk barked. "Communications, have I got a channel open to the *Merrimack*?"

"Yes, sir, channel's been open!"

Kirk's fist fell like a sledgehammer on the comm button on the command chair. "Captain Decker, this is Kirk. I'm throwing a tractor on the missile to pull it off course. It should give you an opening to lock your torpedoes before it's out of range."

"Nice move, Jim," Decker responded. "Don't let that thing swing around and bite you in the ass. Lock and load your own torpedoes. When I give you the word, come hard about and prepare to fire a spread."

"Aye, sir!" Leaning forward in the chair, Kirk nodded to Odell. "You heard him, Lieutenant. Full impulse power! Pull that missile around and stand by photon torpedoes!"

"Yes, sir!" Odell's heavy exhalation came more of relief than of exertion as he flung every ounce of power remaining in the *Leonis*'s straining impulse engines to drag the missile out of its lane. Relieved though he was that his crisis of command had lasted no more than a few minutes, he felt a deep premonition that he would be faced with a different kind of relief much too soon.

"They've got a grip on it, Captain!" Brent crowed. "The Manticore is deviating, passing three two four mark nine!"

"Very well." Decker leant forward in his chair and peered over Brent's shoulder at the navigational display. "Lock phasers on the tail end. Maybe we can knock out its engines."

"Shouldn't we try and hit the warhead, sir?" Skappas inquired.

"And be incinerated in a hydromonium phosphate blast at this range? Christ, no!" Decker spat. He punched the intercom button on the arm of the chair. "Jim, you still there?"

"Still open, sir!" Kirk responded.

"All right, stand by to whip her around. We'll try and get it in a crossfire!"

"Phasers locked on the missile's behind, sir!" Brent's report drowned out Kirk's response.

"*Fire!*" Decker shouted, pounding his fist on the arm of the chair.

Blue-white beams of solid energy burst from the emitters on the *Merrimack*'s underside, lighting up the entire viewscreen as they hurtled toward the tail end of the soaring Manticore. The entire tail end of the missile disintegrated, a blinding burst of flame vanishing into nothingness with no air or fuel to sustain it. The fragments flew in all directions and the Manticore wrenched off course harder yet under the pull from the *Leonis* - but not all of the fragments broke loose from the tail end.

Little had Decker or his crew realized that the tail end of the Manticore had been designed to burst apart in the first place once the missile had gained sufficient altitude. Four separate panels broke open, one on each quadrant of the missile, allowing liquid-fueled rockets to undulate outward on double-jointed extenders. With a slight loss of acceleration but not self-propulsion, the Manticore barreled onward.

"They think of every goddamned thing, don't they?" Decker growled. "Jim! Status report!"

"We pulled it off course, but it's breaking free!" Kirk answered. "Sir, what are your orders?"

"Hard about, on my mark!" Decker arose from the chair and leant over the helm console between Brent and Skappas. "Lock photon torpedoes on target! Stand by to fire a spread!"

"Torpedoes standing by, sir," Brent said as he snapped three switches in quick succession.

"All right, Jim, hard over! Bring her around! Lock torpedoes and fire as you bear!"

"Aye, sir!" Kirk stood up and leant over the helm behind Odell, braced half on the back of the helmsman's chair and half on the control console. "Cut impulse power, Mr. Odell! Let it pull us around! Torpedoes stand by!"

The *Leonis* heaved and yawed violently to port as Odell cut off impulse thrust, allowing the Manticore, still in the grasp of the tractor beam, to jolt it into a hard turn. The ship swerved in a much tighter circle than it possibly could have under ordinary maneuvering thrust, in fact nearly spinning on its vertical axis, bringing hundreds of stars dashing across the main viewscreen in a dizzying blur until Dimidium burst into view. In moments the planet filled the entire screen, the *Merrimack* became visible for only a moment and then just as quickly vanished behind the huge, lumbering, thrusting shaft of the Manticore as it loomed impossibly close to the whirling *Leonis*.

"*FIRE!*" Decker bellowed.

He watched with grim satisfaction as a blood-red quartet of torpedo exhaust trails streaked into view on the screen, bearing down on the

Manticore without mercy.

He refocused on the *Leonis* and held his breath.

"Fire torpedoes!" Kirk shouted.

The four-torpedo spread from the *Leonis* might have arrived a second too late behind the *Merrimack's* barrage, were it not for the Manticore's drastic deviation from course. From both sides of the missile, eight alternating torpedoes scored eight alternating hits. The burst of flame appeared on the side facing the *Merrimack* first. Its second torpedo struck home almost simultaneously with the *Leonis's* first, the Manticore shook, and buckled, its course skewing into a negative pitch perpendicular to the planet's orbit. The *Leonis* shook in unison, suddenly free from the whipping motion of the tractor beam as the two middle sections of the missile disintegrated. All at once the tractor beam had nothing left to grab, just a short-lived fireball quickly giving way to empty, airless space.

The flames vanished as quickly as they had from the missile's tail - but still the Manticore powered onward, leaving the debris of its outer shell behind. That shell and its enclosed rockets had also enclosed a solid, gleaming shaft with the missile's bulbous warhead at one end and an ion engine at the other. The pale yellow gas of attitude thrusters could be seen, firing one and two at a time, altering the missile's heading back toward its original course: and now Decker, standing stock-still in the middle of the bridge with his fists clenching and loosening, could see the warhead in all its gigantic size. He glowered at the bulbous abhorrence: no need to ask what kind of damage it would do. The most basic principle of weapons of mass destruction had been to destroy entire cities and kill tens of thousands. Hydromonium phosphate or worse, it could unthinkingly erase the entire state of Alaska from the map of Earth.

"God almighty, won't *anything* stop that missile?" he snapped, pounding the arm of the chair with the heel of his hand.

"Beats hell out of me, sir!" Skappas was evidently under such stress as to abandon proper decorum on the bridge.

"I'm reading a fission reaction in its midsection, sir," Forrester said, as if offering an answer. "But it's uncontrolled! The missile will reach Delta Pavonis just in time to blow an entire continent off the surface!"

Aboard the *Leonis*, Kirk braced himself in the command chair as the ship's pitching and rocking settled out. The exploding torpedoes had disrupted the tractor beam, and the Manticore had seemingly gone rogue, passing down the *Leonis's* port side. He ignored Odell's murmur of despair and strode behind him, leaning on the bridge rail behind the science station.

"Sir, the missile's veering back to its original course," Odell groaned loudly.

"Gary, sensors!" Kirk barked. "Is that missile being controlled from some point on the surface?"

"Let me double-check it...." Mitchell jumped out of his chair and hastily snapped several function switches on the console as he pushed his eyes to the viewer. "That's an affirmative, Jim! I'm picking up a one-way carrier wave from the eastern continent, broad wave, signal strength of six hundred megawatts!"

"That means they could control it as far as...." Odell broke off after one cursory glance at his navigation screen. "Straight at us! It's turning straight for us, Commander!"

"Evasive action!" Kirk bounded to the isle in the midst of the bridge. "Captain Decker, did you read?"

"I got it, Jim!" Decker answered. "We'll worry about the missile, you take care of the control point! But for God's sake don't get yourselves blown out of orbit first!"

"But - " For a moment Odell seemed to lose his capacity to speak. When he regained it, he could manage only a blurt: "How - how do they know our position?"

"Never mind about that." Kirk clapped the back of Odell's chair with one hand and guided himself back into the command chair with the other. "Bring us hard over, course one three four mark seven. Stand by on - "

"*Kirk!*" The speaker crackled with the volume of Decker's urgent shout. "Kirk, get the hell out of there! You've got surface-to-space rockets incoming!"

Kirk's adrenaline surged and he stood up ramrod-straight again, not even having touched the seat of the chair. The Manticore approaching them bow on and -

"Two of 'em airborne!" Mitchell called out. "Same trajectory as the radio signal, heading straight for our secondary hull!"

"Odell, we have got to turn *faster!*" Kirk urged.

"I'm trying, sir!" Panic edged Odell's voice once again, he slapped the back of his hand on the console with an open gesture of helplessness. "But with only one-half impulse power available, this is all she's got for us!"

"The *Kobayashi Maru* was never like this," Kirk grated. "Increase yaw to - "

All at once, he pitched forward again, propelled by an unknown force to a hard landing on the astrocompass in front of him. With a tremendous crash the *Leonis* rocked violently to port, as if the planet had broken orbit and deliberately hurled itself against the ship's secondary hull. Odell was hurled completely out of his seat, wind knocked clean out of him as he crashed to the deck against the upper level of the bridge. For a moment the lights blinked out completely, leaving the flashing red-alert light and the warning beacon on the helm as the only illumination.

In that dim red flash Kirk could no longer see Odell sitting at the helm. He groped about on the console in search of the main viewer switch,

but all of a sudden a wash of light - dimmer than before, but incandescent illumination nevertheless - glared upon the bridge again. Kirk pushed upright and spun around, just in time to see LaSalle's hands retreating from the emergency lighting switches at the engineering station.

"LaSalle, I need that viewing screen!" Kirk hollered.

"That was another ion blast, Jim," Mitchell panted as he bent over the sensor viewer. "Damn near sheared off the number one nacelle."

"We've got maneuvering thrusters, but that's all," LaSalle added. "Think I've got - " He punched a bypass and the viewing screen shimmered, the jumbled static fading, and the menacing image of the Manticore still closing with the *Leonis* head-on, occupying the exact center.

"Range!" Kirk snapped.

"Only three thousand kilometers now, sir," Odell said. "But with only half speed, we'll never get a hold of it!"

"Tell me what we *can* do, Mr. Odell, not what we *can't*!" The blind but violent gesture of Kirk's hand came close enough to striking Odell's cheekbone that the helmsman flinched. Kirk took one long step toward the captain's chair, then spun round again: he caught a brief peripheral glimpse of the *Merrimack* sailing across the lower right corner of the screen before it disappeared from view.

The Manticore, however, grew larger by the second, now filling over half the field of vision.

"Commander...." Odell's voice was muted. "I think I know what we can do."

Chapter 2

"Kirk, what's your status?" Decker demanded.

"Heavily damaged and barely able to make headway, Captain," Kirk replied. "But we still have enough power left for one more kick."

"All right, let's hear what you got."

"We'll move the *Leonis* to low orbit while you catch the missile in your tractor beam. If you can slow it down, change its direction, delay the impact by a minute, that will give us time to abandon ship and then allow the *Leonis* to intercept and detonate it. The closer to the planet, the better, so the Dimidians won't have time to correct its heading."

"That doesn't give you a whole hell of a lot of time to get off, Jim," Decker warned. "If you're gonna blow that thing up in midair, we can't hang around in transporter range that long!"

"It's a chance we'll have to take," Kirk insisted. "I've ordered the ship's company to evacuate via shuttlecraft and escape vessels. The last of us will beam down to the planet and contact you when all is clear."

Reluctantly, Decker nodded assent. "All right, get going, but when this is over, all had damn well better be clear. Decker out!" He snapped off the comm channel and leaned forward. "Let's get to it, Pete. Come to course one three eight mark ten, full impulse! Stand by on tractor beam!"

The Manticore had covered nearly 500 miles from the surface of Dimidium when the *Merrimack* lunged after it. Decker caught one last glimpse of the *Leonis* on the viewer, trailing plasma from its port nacelle and starting to drift sideways, shuttlecraft and escape vessels popping from its primary hull like so much cosmic flotsam and jetsam. *You'd better know what you're doing, Jim. This is the last shot we have.*

"Ten seconds to tractor beam range," Brent announced.

"All right, don't wait for my order," Decker told him. "And for God's sake don't overshoot the reverse course!"

The plume of gas at the tail of the Manticore disappeared on the edge of the viewer. The hurtling missile grew impossibly quickly, took up the corner of the screen, then the side, then almost the entire bottom half before the *Merrimack* soared over it.

"Tractor beam....*engaged!*" Brent shouted. He threw a switch with a snap and angled the *Merrimack* to pass perpendicular to the missile, locking the tractor beam on its rear end. At first, it was almost as if the Manticore resisted, trying to power forth on its radio-controlled course. But without wasting a word, Brent punched another series of switches on the left side of his console and twisted a control knob on his right before half-turning in his chair.

"Mr. Odax, I'm gonna need a boost to the impulse engines with warp power!" he yelled over his shoulder at the engineering station.

"It comes!" The Edosian bridge engineering officer made a rapid succession of switch flips and motions with his left and middle arms, while with his right he executed the commands he'd put in on the console. Brent's impulse-power indicators flashed anew, he twisted the control knob again and grabbed both sides of the helm as the *Merrimack* lurched. The impulse engines throbbed, their pitch rising like a discordant thirty-piece orchestra reaching a crescendo. The tractor beam strained, the entire ship roared and vibrated with the rising, thrumming bellow of the engines as the ship heaved mightily on the tail of the Manticore.

Amazingly, the Manticore lurched with it.

"It's coming around, Captain!" Forrester called out.

"Stay on it, Pete!" Decker ordered. "Give it the heave-ho! What's the status of the *Leonis*?"

"She's...." There was a momentary pause as Forrester refocused the sensors. "She's in orbit, I read six shuttlecraft and fifteen escape vessels. No more than a skeleton crew on board her now, sir!"

"Heading of the missile?"

"Twenty degrees mark five, swinging left!"

"Stand by to take a parallel course, Pete! We've got to give Kirk enough time to abandon ship!"

Keeping a firm footing on the decks of the *Leonis* had proven a challenge as the ship, its artificial gravity all but out of commission, began to sideslip into the influence of Dimidium's gravity. Kirk jumped to the helm, and leaning in alongside Odell, looked into the navigation viewer. The staticky, iridescent image showed an ever-narrowing aspect on both the Manticore and the *Merrimack* - and only a few remaining minutes of life for the *Leonis*.

"Chief of security reports last of the escape craft clear, remaining crew heading for the transporter room," Mitchell called out. He had been ricocheting back and forth between the science and communication panels, pulling double duty ever since the ion strike induced an electrical arc that stopped the comm officer's heart.

"Time to missile impact?" Kirk demanded.

"Estimate two minutes, ten seconds," Mitchell answered.

"All right, gentlemen, we've done all we can here," Kirk announced. "Time we live to fight another day. Clear the bridge! All personnel to the transporter room on the double! Issue hand phasers to all evacuees, we may have a fight on our hands when we get down there!"

Mitchell, LaSalle, and the yeoman and navigator - the last two surviving lesser mortals of the *Leonis's* bridge - were as quick as they were relieved to comply in dashing for the turbolift. Odell, however, lingered at the helm, eyeing his navigation viewer, motioning with little more than a foot toward the deck.

"Mr. Odell!" Kirk cajoled him.

"We can't miss, Mr. Kirk." Odell's tone was strangely empty of emotion or passion. "We can't let this one pass."

"Captain Decker will handle it," Kirk snapped. He jumped to the lower level of the bridge and grabbed Odell by the arm. "Get below with the rest of us, Lieutenant, that's an *order!*" He half dragged the barely resisting Odell out of his seat and up to the turbolift. Sparks and flicks of flame still spattered from the control panels on the bridge of the *Leonis* as the doors hissed shut on them for the last time, and the turbolift, in no more than the feeble grip of the emergency power reserves, lurched sickeningly downward.

Brent looked like he was shifting involuntarily from side to side in his seat as he manipulated the helm controls - and the *Merrimack* yawed in near perfect unison with him. "The missile's fighting the tractor, Captain," he said. "Whoever's controlling it from the surface doesn't want to loosen up on it so easily. Not sure I can hold it!"

"You can hold it, Pete!" Decker flailed a hand to one side. "Odax, give the tractor beam a shot of auxiliary power!"

Perhaps both ships could have handled the Manticore in tandem, but for the *Merrimack* the struggle was heavy. Brent's eyes darted hither and yon, and never rested more than a second or two on the main viewer, his navigational display, and the impulse power indicators as he thrust port, then starboard, then up along the Z-axis in a never-ending attempt to hold both the *Merrimack* and the Manticore on a course toward the planet.

"Impulse control circuits begin to overheat!" Odax called out.

"Captain...." Brent pleaded.

"Hang on, Pete! Just *hang on!*" Decker clutched the arms of his chair in an iron grip as he saw the *Leonis* come clearly into view. The *Merrimack* swerved and veered and jinked about under Brent's hair-trigger helm commands, trying to hold the Manticore on a straight heading back into the planet's gravitational pull.

The juddering, grinding turbolift slammed to a halt twenty paces down the corridor from the *Leonis's* transporter room. Kirk bolted alongside Odell, hustling him along with the navigator, yeoman, Mitchell and LaSalle on rear guard. The ship had begun to yaw to starboard as its orbit decayed, Dimidium's gravity outpulled its own and a perceptible rise in re-entry heat started to radiate from the bulkheads.

Kirk whirlwinded into the transporter room just in time to see half a dozen survivors vanishing from the pads. The security chief, a built, middle-aged lieutenant commander, hastily reset the controls as Kirk dashed for the comm panel.

"*Leonis* to *Merrimack!*" he hollered.

"Comms are out, Commander," the security chief said, shaking his head apologetically. "I'm not even sure we have enough power for one more transport!"

"Well, we'd better flip around and find out," Kirk said. "Let's move, people!"

"Sir, there's seven of us," Odell pointed out. "Our transporter capacity is only six."

"Then go," Kirk said sharply. "I'll beam the rest of you down, set it for automatic transport and join you."

"No, sir, I'll stay," Odell said.

"This is no time for martyrdom, Mr. Odell! Get on a pad!"

Vehemently Odell shook his head. "I'm a dead man, Mr. Kirk, one way or the other. I'll never be able to face the judgment of all - "

"C'mon, Kenny, we don't have time for this!" the navigator burst out. "That damn missile is gonna plow into us any second, let's go!"

Kirk was just opening his mouth to renew his order when Odell jumped backward and behind the transporter console. Before Kirk could stop him, he'd activated the transporter, casting one last look over the five bemused faces in the chamber before they sparkled away to nothing.

"Captain Sheffield was counting on me, sir," Odell despaired. "He trusted me to hold this side of the bridge. I failed him. I let the bridge collapse, I might as well have gone down with it." Hurriedly he reset the transporter and adjusted its settings.

Kirk leaned heavily on the back side of the console. "You're still needed, Odell," he cajoled. "Damn it, don't you think starship captains grapple with the consequences of their actions every hour that they're alive?"

"I know they do, sir." Odell shook his head in resignation. "And I know I'm not up to the challenge. And right now, I know where I'm needed."

All of a sudden he activated the transporter again.

Kirk was caught totally by surprise. He hadn't seen the settings Odell had been inputting, couldn't know that the distraught lieutenant had focused the transporter beam onto an interior point no more than a meter in diameter - the meter in which Kirk was standing. Kirk hadn't the chance to speak before the beam grabbed him and he energized in a shimmering golden sparkle, out of Odell's sight a second later.

"Sorry, Commander," Odell muttered. "That's me saving you some trouble." He hurried to adjust the beam to the same coordinates he'd beamed the other five crewmen and sent Kirk's pattern on its way. Then he dashed for the corridor and the turbolift.

"Impulse control circuits have heated over, Captain!" Odax hollered. "Engine power falls off and attitude control fails!"

As if to underscore, the *Merrimack* heaved forward, the view of Dimidium jerked to one side and the roar of the impulse engines faded somewhat. No one needed a report from Brent to see the planet suddenly looming a lot larger, a lot quicker, on the viewer.

"Disengage!" Decker snapped. "Lay in a course toward Delta Pavonis. Stand by warp drive!"

The *Merrimack* lurched again, this time upward, as Odax cut off the straining engine power and the tractor beam dropped. Almost immediately the Manticore began to veer to the right. No telling if it would turn far enough to break Dimidium's gravity again, or....

"The *Leonis* is drifting," Forrester said. "She's falling into the atmosphere, Captain! The missile's going to miss her for sure!"

"Oh, for Christ's sake not now!" Decker growled. "Is it changing course?"

"Yes, sir, but I don't think it's going to break the planet's gravity in time to avert an impact!"

"Talk about a reversal of fortune," Skappas said absently. "From trying to broker a peace agreement with a hostile alien race to dropping their own missile on them - "

"L'Rema!" Decker cut him off. "Can't you get through to the *Leonis*?"

"I've been trying, sir! Their comm system is out!" A frustrated hiss undertoned L'Rema's voice.

Decker sat back heavily and thumped the arm of his chair with a despairing hand. No stopping the Manticore now, no means of control. Just sitting, watching the screen, watching the Dimidians' day of doom unfold by every second of its occurrence.

The turbolift doors lacked the power to open even halfway. Odell heaved, pushing them apart by sheer strength and force of will, and ran through acrid smoke, dangling cables and flickering lights back to the helm. He had no illusions that the *Leonis* had any propulsive power left, but all he needed was one little push.

Well, one little push and a functioning navigational sensor.

The sensor viewer showed him nothing but purple static. He rapped on it once, twice, extracting from it just enough of a blink of an image to see that the Manticore was swinging away even as it fell toward the outer layer of the atmosphere. No time to lose. He examined the flashing, flickering indicator lights on his console next: not to his surprise, the warp drive was dead as a doornail, and impulse power long since shot to hell. All he had left was maneuvering thrusters - he could only wish upon a star that it would be enough.

He fired the port forward thruster, then the lateral midships, then the aft port, and each successive thruster all around the circumference of the *Leonis*'s primary hull until the ship gyrated into a discus-like spin. Odell looked into the viewer again. The Manticore was still on a course to pass astern. Firing the thrusters one and two at a time, he awkwardly spun, aimed, coaxed the dying *Leonis* further toward its interception point with fate.

Kirk had found himself mingling with fewer than twenty evacuees from the *Leonis* after Odell drop-kicked him into that transporter sleight-of-hand. They stood on a rocky hillside overlooking several kilometers of flat, arid terrain with a mountain range visible in the distance. Dimidium was at the far lower fringes of Class M, with air that was warm and thick enough to keep any visitors with respiratory ailments from dropping by. In another direction they could see a dark plume of smoke billowing skyward in the distance - undoubtedly the site of the artillery strike by the Gesikan faction. There was no telling how far away they were from the site of the failed conference, but one thing was for certain: the Gesikan extremists had indiscriminately killed their own people along with the landing party from the *Leonis* and the Pavoni delegation.

As he marched among the survivors assessing their condition, it occurred to Kirk that he'd never seen a Dimidian or a Pavoni up close: but he was given to understand that the Dimidians strongly resembled bipedal bulls. He considered the ancient Earth sport of bullfighting and wondered if -

All at once he spun around, eyes to the sky, all hands staring upward along with him as a vast effulgence of firelight burst above the flatlands to the southeast. It began looking like a star going supernova. Then the ball of fire spread, diffused outward into a four-lobed conflagration that lit up the entire hemisphere even as Dimidium's sun set. The survivors had no choice but to shield their eyes from the blast or be blinded. The funeral pyre of the *Leonis* was spectacular in its vastness, its intensity, and its magnificence, for the end of one crippled starship had meant the survival of not one, but two planets and their civilizations.

Kirk breathed heavily, slowly, thinking of Odell, a man who had somehow indicted himself for a moment of indecisive cowardice in one breath and resorted to self-sacrifice in the next. What kind of man would seek suicidal redemption out of belief that he'd failed in his duty and couldn't look at himself in the mirror every morning without spitting on it?

No time to ruminate on that now. The Manticore had exploded at an altitude great enough to avoid flattening the entire continent, but the atmosphere had only just begun to react. The air had heated and thickened, the winds had kicked up, pressures had changed in random pockets and breathing amongst several of the crew had become laborious. The radiation from the sky fire had incinerated some high clouds, turning the sky a blazing, hellish shade of red. Now the sound of the Manticore's detonation reached the surface: the low, intense, rolling rumble sounded like an old-fashioned steam train carrying mobile cannon platforms approaching from under a massive thunderhead.

Kirk searched among the survivors and eventually set his attention on an ensign in a medical uniform, carrying a tricorder. He demanded readings, but had to repeat the demand to distract the young woman's attention from the orbital inferno. She moved slowly and fidgeted with the tricorder, barely able to look away from the fading fire and concentrate.

"I'm reading....about thirty life forms to the east," she said presently. "Body temperature among them is collectively rising. They all read elevated levels of cortisol."

"I need to know who and how close they are, Ensign!" Kirk would have liked her to take a reading of his own cortisol level right that moment.

"I'm sorry, Commander, this is a medical tricorder," she explained patiently. "It can't determine the identity of a species at this range. But according to these readings...." She did a double take and peered intently at the tricorder. "There's fifty of them now. And whoever they are, they're very, very angry."

"I suppose I can't blame them," Kirk said matter-of-factly. "All hands, find cover. And ready phasers! We may have a ground skirmish before us."

At least the fortunes of the *Leonis* crew were such that none of them were injured seriously enough to preclude concealment. Some of them found it behind rocks, others in pits and holes, barely at the edges of landforms. But as Kirk darted about ensuring that everyone was safely hidden, he turned around as the rumble of the explosion died away and made audible the sounds of angry shouts, of roars, of pounding footfalls and clanging metal. One would think a rabble of ferocious Vikings was about to go up against a Scottish war band for the unholy racket they were making.

Mitchell stood beside Kirk and fondled his phaser with a deep, apprehensive breath. The medic hadn't been pulling Kirk's leg - whoever those life forms were, they were definitely not happy.

As the rumble of the Manticore's demise faded away and the clattering, shouting and stomping took its place, Kirk motioned for Mitchell to crouch alongside him and hold his phaser at the ready. Twenty against thirty hadn't been half bad odds, but if another score of Dimidians kept joining every minute or so, they wouldn't last. They were warlike, and they were in an uproar.

The survivors of the *Leonis*, Kirk considered, were doubtless flooded with adrenaline after their narrow escape from the Dimidians' wrath, yet now here they were facing it all over again. The approaching hostiles were still out of sight on the other side of the hill. Starfleet defense training and phaser pistols were not yet tested against Dimidian combativity and whatever unknown armament they possessed. With all these factors considered, what were the odds then?

The only way to find out was to see how this barroom brawl would take shape.

"You know something, Jim?" Mitchell said offhandedly. "I'd say this is the closest we've come to open warfare since our last row with the Klingons."

Kirk nodded slowly. "Somehow I have a feeling these people are a damn sight nastier." He motioned toward the hillside with his phaser, just a bare second or two before the first of the Dimidians charged around it.

"Bipedal bulls" was a polite descriptor for this race. The Dimidians were vaguely humanoid, but their bone structure was such that their crania protruded from the sides of their heads and tapered into a pair of forward-pointing horns. Their eyes were small, their mouths broad, and their nasal protrusions well suited for scent tracking and olfactory recall. And right now, those protrusions were aflame.

Instinctively Mitchell dropped, resting his upper weight on one hand, but Kirk straightened up at the same time. The Dimidian leading the rabble wore an animal skin over his head: his face was covered in some sort of metallic war paint, and he wore metal joint armor that looked thin and flimsy at a glance, but might break the hand of an unsuspecting attacker who had no knowledge of its composition. They carried blunt-force weapons, blades, projectile weapons - almost every imaginable type of small arm short of a Type I hand phaser. Seeing Kirk and Mitchell hunkering in plain view, the leader bellowed and waved his arm in a windmill motion.

"I don't know about you, but I'd rather be doing an Orion contra dance right now," Mitchell said conversationally.

"There are plenty of things I'd rather be doing now, Gary." Kirk held his phaser level and his hand gradually tightened about the grip.

Truly not to expectations, the air between them and the onrushing Dimidians shimmered. In his low crouch, Mitchell could have sworn it was another atmospheric disturbance being shoved toward them by the detonation of the Manticore. But Kirk recognized it in a flash - the shimmer, then the sparkle, then the irrefutable chiming tones of a transporter beam.

Six men in security uniforms materialized and wasted no time waiting for orders. They rushed to positions defending the forward flanks of the *Leonis* entrenchment, then the air shimmered again and six more energized figures appeared. The Dimidians were lost to Kirk and Mitchell's view as Decker, Skappas, Dr. Suslowicz, and three more security men solidified: Suslowicz bore a tricorder and a medkit, but Decker and Skappas both held high-powered phaser rifles.

Decker didn't need to see the forward jerk of Kirk's head to know trouble was imminent. The noise of the approaching Dimidians was plenty to alert him. Whirling around, seeing the livid-looking beings coming at them like so many Visigoths, Decker almost unthinkingly yanked the phaser rifle from his shoulder and fired a point-blank blast at the ground in front of the oncoming rabble. The impact disintegrated several fair-sized rocks and tore a great ovular pit in the ground, bringing several of the Dimidians jolting to a halt in their tracks rather than tumble

headfirst into the smoldering new hole. The impact left ears ringing and voices shouting. Weapons rattled and feet pounded. But Decker held his ground.

"All right, our new friends, that's far enough," he announced loudly.

"Friends?" The foremost Dimidian, the one whose head was adorned with what looked like the pelt of a yak, showed his rounded, two-inch-long canines with his snarl. "*Friends*, you want? I am Bilokersee, warmaster of the Gesikan Dimidians, and *I* decide who our friends are!"

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Bilokersee," Decker said unflappably, resting the rifle on his shoulder. "I'm Matthew Decker, captain of the Federation starship *Merrimack*, but you can call me Matt. How about you, can I call you Bill?"

Bilokersee sneered, showing his two full rows of enormous, soaking teeth. "You can call me your mortal enemy, you meddling Federation pards. We know all about you. You travel the skies, colonizing, usurping, taking what you want from other people's homes, destroying their ways of life. And now this for the result! You even turn races against each other with your war-mongering and your us-versus-them colonialism! You'll take none of our land or holdings!"

"This guy is like a Klingon on hormones," Mitchell muttered aside to Kirk.

Decker cocked his head thoughtfully. "Say, Jim, about how far are we from Earth? Two, three hundred light-years?"

"Give or take a couple of AUs," Kirk said, moving forward to stand beside Decker. "So if these people have been watching Earth from this distance, they'd be seeing it right around the time of the Third World War. You can hardly blame them for indicting our ancestors and their 'us-versus-them' way of thinking."

"Which was incinerated along with the six hundred million people who were killed in that war," Decker recalled. "But, that was a long time ago, wasn't it? As a race, we've learned our lesson from it. And if we are destroying anyone's way of life, well, that beats hell out of letting them destroy themselves, don't you think?"

"Clearly we know far more about you than you know about us," Bilokersee scoffed. "Dimidians don't believe in this....this outflung philosophy of treating everyone with, how would you Earth people say it, 'children's mittens'? We believe in sacrifice! We believe in laying down that which is loved and cherished to protect ourselves from the likes of you!"

"Don't speak to us about *sacrifice!*" Kirk snarled. "There are exactly two reasons we're all standing here now - because one man, *one man*, made the *ultimate* sacrifice to destroy that missile of yours and make sure that neither you nor the Pavoni would be annihilated. And what sacrifices are you given to making? Yourselves? Your caprices? Or your fellow Dimidians with whom you disagree?"

"He sacrificed himself to protect a bunch of weaklings." Bilokersee bared his teeth again, this time in more of a callous grin than a snarl. "And not just the Pavoni - the Dimidian reformists who sought your filthy Federation's involvement in their interplanetary relations. The Pavoni can't even defend themselves against your kind. If we have to destroy them to keep them from inviting your kind to - "

"All right, all right, let me get this straight," Decker interrupted, waving his free hand. "In one breath you accuse the Federation of colonialism and hostile takeover, and in the next you're telling me you have to destroy the village to save it. That's been the idea all along, hasn't it? You're trying to tell me launching interplanetary weapons of mass destruction at Delta Pavonis is the only way to protect yourselves?"

"We're trying to tell you we mean to keep the Federation out of our system, whatever sacrifice must be made. If that means destroying the Pavoni, so be it. If that means destroying you with them, we are more than ready." Bilokersee took a belligerent step forward, brandishing a weapon reminiscent of an Andorian bladestaff, but he stopped dead in his tracks immediately as he found himself staring into the emitters of a dozen phasers.

He grinned even more nastily. "You see? You're more than ready and willing to defend yourselves from attack. We're not so very different, are we, Matthew Decker, captain of the Federation starship *Merrimack*? Very excited about protecting yourselves. What if we were to launch another Manticore at Delta Pavonis? Would you use your own ship to intercept it? Sacrifice your vessel and your people to protect a weakling race?"

"What makes you think we have only one ship in range of this planet?" Kirk said. "As it may be we underestimate your willingness to sacrifice, you underestimate Starfleet's expanse. You see, we're assigned to the one thousand, three hundred and forty-fourth ship to be constructed for the Federation. There's thirty of us and a hundred of you down here, but one planet against more than a thousand starships - I'm much more optimistic about our odds."

For a moment, Bilokersee hesitated. Then his teeth showed again. "Perhaps you've underestimated our strength as well as our conviction. Perhaps we have more weapons at our disposal than you have ships."

Decker smiled faintly. "You're gonna talk to us about strength now, huh?" he said nonchalantly. He shoved his phaser rifle into Kirk's arms, pulled out his communicator, and flipped it on. "Decker to *Merrimack*."

"Go ahead, Captain," L'Rema replied.

"Put me through to Lieutenant Brent. All right, listen up, Pete. Carry out ship's standing order number four at my command. And send word to the *Yorktown* to repeat the action in one minute."

"Aye, Captain," Brent said. "Standing by."

"Execute."

Decker lowered his communicator. He had wasted no words and no time. He kept a close watch on Bilokersee, saw the consternation in the

snouted, wrinkled face as the lightning-like phaser blast hurtled out of the darkening sky. It slammed into the ground only half a mile behind the *Leonis* entrenchment, blew a giant crater in the flat ground, shook the surrounding land and sent dirt and dust flying throughout an eighty-meter radius. The *Leonis* survivors were startled, but the *Merrimack* personnel were unfazed.

And the Dimidians, Decker noted, flinched in unison.

"There, you see that?" he said impassively, gesturing behind him. "That was a demonstration - a small one. In exactly one minute, another ship is going to hit a spot twelve hundred meters that way." He pointed past the Dimidian band. "Then the rest of our ships will fire a few more random point-blank blasts at the surface of the planet and see if one of them hits your missile installation, and we'll see how you like your world being threatened with total annihilation from another planet. So now you need to ask yourself something, Bill: How many shots will it take, how much of your land will be blown to dust, and what are you willing to sacrifice to prevent it? Personally, I think you can do without your policy of interplanetary expansionism. If that's not too hard a pill to swallow, you can come on board my ship, we can take a little trip to Delta Pavonis, and we can try and bust out that peace agreement one more time."

Bilokersee said nothing. He still stared past Decker and Kirk at the newly blasted crater in the surface behind them.

"Your time's running out, Bill," Decker went on. "Now I give you my word as a representative of the Federation that if you drop the act and let the Pavoni join us in peace, we'll leave Dimidium out of it. Either that, or see the surface of your planet wiped out. What's it gonna be?"

He held Bilokersee's gaze and dearly hoped the Dimidians didn't have some special mental power that enabled them to recognize a bluff when it was being proffered.

Bilokersee glanced obliquely at his people at his left flank and then his right. Some of them had surreptitiously tried to move in on the Starfleet personnel, but Decker's security force held them at bay. Finally, Bilokersee's posture sagged, his hardened glare softened and he took half a step backward.

"We will go," he said. "But you will allow us to maintain our current level of defense, including our missiles. And in the meantime, we will hold you to your promise on behalf of your Federation. Leave Dimidium alone - or live to see the day of your doom."

"Leave Delta Pavonis alone and you got a deal." Decker smiled laconically and lifted his communicator again. "Decker to *Merrimack*. We'll be assuming the *Leonis*'s duties of brokering the peace agreement. Beam their wounded aboard first, then us and the Dimidian delegation. Tell Lieutenant Brent to lay in a course for Delta Pavonis."

"Acknowledged, Captain," L'Rema purred.

Decker turned around, taking a cursory glance at the *Leonis* survivors arising from cover and preparing to beam up. "Nice bluff," he muttered to Kirk.

"Same to you," Kirk said. "We're lucky it worked. But if we're taking Dimidian representatives to Delta Pavonis, how do you plan on explaining that we're the only ship present?"

"I'll break that bridge when I come to it. Now where's this Lieutenant Odell? I'd like to have a word with him."

Somber, Kirk glanced at the ground. "He stayed with the *Leonis*. I'll make a full report when we beam up, but for now, he was the man who sacrificed himself to stop the Manticore."

"I see. All right, I want the ship on Yellow Alert once we beam up. Mitchell, you keep an eye on both the Dimidians and this planet till we reach Delta Pavonis. Any sign of trouble, I want 'em behind a force field before they can say 'Make Dimidium Mighty Again!'"

"Aye, sir," Mitchell acknowledged. "And Captain, if I may be so bold, you're a regular Christopher Pike, taking this bull by the horns the way you did."

"Well, don't say that within their earshot unless you want to ruin all this nice fiery progress I've made," Decker told him in a sotto.

Chapter 3

Captain's log, Stardate 1160.6. The Yorktown arrived just in the nick of time to assure the Dimidians that we weren't alone in their system. The extra backup enabled us to sit them down with the Pavoni and work out a non-aggression pact, which will assure that Dimidium remains independent of the Federation as long as it mounts no further unprovoked attacks against neighboring planets. Both the Merrimack and the Yorktown have been ordered to return to Earth with the survivors of the Leonis and Pavoni emissaries to oversee their planet's induction into the Federation government. But in the meantime, First Officer Kirk and I have orders to report to Starfleet Headquarters for a debriefing, along with the senior surviving officers from the Leonis.

"Good afternoon, gents," Mitchell said as he approached a table in the officers' lounge, where Brent was sitting with two of the *Leonis's* surviving lieutenants. "Mind if I join you?"

"No, go on, pull up a chair," Brent said, motioning.

Mitchell placed his coffee cup and chicken sandwich at the head of the table and leaned across. "I don't believe we got acquainted the other day," he said to the *Leonis* men. "Gary Mitchell."

"Chad MacNeil." The red-tunicked lieutenant reached up to shake Mitchell's hand. "Assistant chief engineer."

"We met up on the bridge," the gold-tunicked lieutenant reminded Mitchell. "I was the navigator. Gerard Schilling."

"Lucky for you to get away from the *Leonis* in time," Mitchell remarked as he sat down.

"Lucky to escape, not so lucky to be up before some damn kind of Starfleet inquisition into the loss of the *Leonis* when we get home," MacNeil said. "Gerry and I are the two senior surviving officers, so I reckon we'll be the first ones to get char-broiled."

"Can't say I blame Kenny Odell for what he did," Schilling said, taking a small swig of coffee. He continued to grip the cup in his hand to quell the trembling.

"But you wouldn't be headed to any kind of inquisition if he didn't," Brent pointed out. "Hell, you wouldn't even be here anymore."

"Well, don't get me wrong. Kenny was a good helmsman. More importantly, he was a good friend. But there were times when I thought he tried a little too hard to be Mr. Personality Kid, you know what I mean? Maybe if he hadn't tried to be such a people pleaser, maybe he could have found the chops for command."

"Did you know him long?" Brent asked.

"We served together for over two years on the *Leonis*. We worked well together, we were both good at our jobs. Makes me sad to think of it this way, but being a people pleaser was Kenny's weakness - and yet it was the same thing that made him a good friend."

"He even tried to take it easy on the ship after the time Commander Sullivan gave him grief for all the high-pitch maneuvers he used to make," MacNeil recalled. "If he'd been in charge of the landing party on Dimidium, though, there damn sure wouldn't have been any pleasing those barbarians."

"Or Starfleet Command, for that matter. You know, that's why he decided to go out in a blaze of glory the way he did. Told Commander Kirk he couldn't face judgment for his failure."

"Well," Mitchell said over a swallow of sandwich, "could be it wasn't just Starfleet's judgment he was worried about. You know anything about his family?"

"His father was a mining operations chief on the Titan colony, and his mother held some high public office or other in Seattle, and he was an only child," Schilling said.

"No wonder he was such a pacifist," MacNeil mused. "Can you imagine trying to settle arguments between your parents when they're both in positions like those?"

"He didn't." Schilling smiled reflectively. "The way he told it, he wanted no part of their disagreements, but he was always getting dragged into them anyway."

"So, when two extraterrestrial races get into an altercation and you get stuck in the middle of that, too...." Brent let his thought trail off.

"Tell me something, Mr. Schilling," Mitchell said. "Just how scared was he when Captain Decker ordered him not to break orbit?"

Schilling took a silent moment's look at the tabletop. "I've seen rabbits less scared of gyrocycles, if I'm being honest." He shook his head and sighed. "I shouldn't speak poorly of him, damn it. He was my friend, and he died saving our lives."

"I'm just saying maybe authority was a problem for him," Mitchell said. "If he was subjugated by it, maybe he was intimidated by the thought of wielding power."

"Maybe," Schilling considered. "I mean, we all have our limits." He nodded toward Brent. "You know Erica Ortigas, from the *Enterprise*?"

"Heard the name," Brent acknowledged. "Heard she's a hellraiser."

"She and Kenny went through the same coxswain course," Schilling said. "And honestly, I think Kenny liked her, but he never could find it in

him to ask her out. He was a great shaker as our chief of navigation, but he never found his self-confidence anyplace else in his life."

"Yeah, I can see it now." MacNeil grinned dryly, seeking to lighten the mood a bit. "One of these days, having a way with women is going to be a prerequisite for starship command."

"If you ask our first officer, it already is," Mitchell scoffed. "Speaking of whom, do you two have to visit the powers that be along with him and Decker, or are you making a separate call?"

"No idea." MacNeil tossed up his hands. "But I was on the *Waterloo* right after the last war with the Klingons, you know, when her orbit decayed over Alpha Centauri and she had to be abandoned? Boy, let me tell you, Starfleet Command wanted to make some heads roll for that one. The board of investigation grilled each of the senior officers one at a time. Took them about eighteen hours, and they wouldn't let anyone go ashore in the meantime."

"Christ," Schilling muttered. "No wonder Kenny didn't want to come home to that. Not so sure I want to, either."

"Well, how do you think I know what we're in for when we get back to Earth?" MacNeil grunted.

"So what do you have to come home to, then?" Mitchell went on, nodding at Schilling.

Schilling shrugged. "I don't know. I'm guessing, I'm hoping, survivor leave. New assignment, maybe....and, I guess, learning to live with all this craziness that's just happened."

"Well, you may be getting the long end of the stick. If you want my opinion, Decker's going to catch some kind of hell for threatening the Dimidians the way he did."

"Starfleet Command registers even lower than the Dimidians on Decker's give-a-shit array," Brent chortled. "And Kirk's, for that matter. Hell, they'll probably both get a promotion out of this."

"Yeah, maybe," Mitchell said. "But then we're liable to find out some of us are better than others at wielding absolute power."

Kirk breathed deeply as he and Decker walked side by side through the cathedral-like main foyer of Starfleet Headquarters. "Far be it from me to object to some good old-fashioned fresh air," he said conversationally. "But I don't see how much longer the Dimidians can survive breathing that mixture of sulfur and carbon they call an atmosphere."

"For all we know, they evolved to it," Decker said. "I know what you mean, though. We read concentrations of toxic particles in their lower atmosphere that would have most of us dying of asphyxia in a few weeks."

"Maybe it's just as well, then, that we agreed not to involve them in Federation business."

"I just hope we didn't make them a promise we can't keep. Some of the old-timers on the Federation Council are bound to insist that we should have tried harder to sway them."

"It's your show of force that mostly concerns me. What do you expect Starfleet to say about threatening them with mass annihilation?"

"I don't give a damn what they say. I've got a few things I'd like to say about starship captains acting as ambassadors and diplomats when we have our own ships' problems to worry about. But meanwhile, if you don't mind, I'll just hang back here and wait to see what the Pavoni have to say about us coming to their aid." Decker flanked right and led the way into an open-concept office recessed from the corridor. A yeoman sat at a desk, filling out legipads. A closed door nestled in the wall across the room: the nameplate on the wall beside it read COMMDR. R.A. BRIENZIO, COMMANDING OFFICER STARSHIP WING 4.

Decker announced himself and Kirk and waited while the yeoman notified his superior that the two men were there to meet him. The slightly abrasive mid-Atlantic voice that emanated from the intercom hadn't changed so much as a cord. Neither had the face when they entered the office, a seamed, olive-hued, oval-shaped face with a large nose and almost no hair framing it. But Raymond Brienzio was somewhat more slender of frame than Decker remembered him from their previous service together on the *Nimitz*.

"Hello, Ray," Decker greeted him, extending his hand.

"Hiya, Matt, good to see you." Brienzio shook hands with each of them in turn. "How are you, Jim? He keeping you out of trouble?"

"Well, where's the fun in staying out of trouble, Commodore?" Kirk said with a lighthearted look.

Brienzio waved for the two men to sit in front of his desk and then plopped down behind it with a loud sigh. "Thought you guys would like to know the board of inquiry is scheduled for Wednesday," he told them.

"You know who's chairing it?" Decker ventured.

"Yeah, Elvinson Rapoza. The guy's got a hard-on for whatever top admiral's billet he can land. Starfleet Security, fleet commander-in-chief....Komack wants to get rid of him, but he's got so many Federation councilors in his pocket he walks with a limp. You two better be on your best behavior if you want him to return any kind of favorable ruling."

"Well, I don't foresee any problem with giving him a straight account of what happened," Kirk said. "After all, many circumstances developed beyond our control, and it's impossible to obey every rule when hundreds of lives are on the line."

"Yeah, the only problem is, he's an old-schooler," Brienzio said. "He was one of the old 'Book Club' guys down at San Diego in the forties, you know, the crowd that wrote the fifth edition of Starfleet General Orders? He could give you a rules exam and if you dotted one 'i' too low

or crossed one 't' at the wrong angle, he'd land on you like a slab of cast rodinium. He believes with his whole heart and soul that you can control and resolve any situation if you follow every rule to the smudges on the ink. But I'm sure I've never seen him on the bridge of a starship."

"And this old bastard thinks he's gonna cruise straight into Bob April's job?" Decker said cynically.

"He may not have the chops for it, but he sure has the clout. Now what's all this I hear about hitting the surface of Dimidium with your phaser banks? That's liable to get Rapoza's attention fast."

"It got the Dimidians', for damn sure. At that point, they were threatening both us and the Pavoni on two separate fronts. And I think they're a race that's not used to being stood up to on their own ground."

"The schoolyard bullies of the Pegasi sector?" Brienzio sought clarification with an amused half-smile.

"Something like that. At any rate, Jim bluffed, I took action, the Dimidians backed down, the Pavoni joined the Federation, and everybody went home happy."

Brienzio scoffed. "If you think the fat-asses in the rear are happy about how things turned out, you've got another think coming," he said wryly. "They don't like it when we project an image of the Federation as some kind of domineering galactic empire. They abhor the thought of risking war over a misunderstanding."

Decker bristled. "Now wait just a damn minute. The Dimidians attacked us for facilitating peace, we lost a starship and two score personnel, and *we're* the domineering oppressors here? Sounds to me like one of those old 'Am I the Asshole' stories from the twenty-first-century computer network."

"To be fair," Kirk commented, "any race that's had prior experience with the Klingons can hardly be blamed for being leery of the Federation."

"Yeah, and the armistice with the Klingons could go belly up any minute," Brienzio said. "And now if we've got another warlike race to contend with aside from them...."

"I don't think I like where you're going with this, Ray." Decker's eyes narrowed. "Self-defense and subjugation are two different things. And if this bum Rapoza is going to try and make us look like the bad guy...."

"Look," Brienzio growled. "I'm trying to get the straight shot from the both of you. You know like I know, old farts like Rapoza have no business judging the actions of front-line Starfleet officers. But that's why you need a flag officer who *has* done front line duty to back you up."

"Commodore, if I may," Kirk spoke up. "It's hardly demonstrable that we violated the non-interference directive, or any other regulation governing contact with an extraterrestrial race. At the worst, we exaggerated our force strength to the Dimidians to persuade them that we had the high ground."

"That's not what Rapoza thinks. Somehow he's convinced himself that you violated General Order Three when you threatened Dimidium with planetwide devastation, even if it *was* a damn lie."

"Oh, horse shit!" Decker snapped. "Forgotten all about GO Twenty-four, hasn't he? There's *nothing* in that order saying you can't raise a credible threat and use an appropriate show of force to back it up, even when you don't intend to carry the threat out!"

"You're talking about ends, Matt," Brienzio said firmly. "The inquiry is only gonna be interested in means. How everything that happened on and above that planet led to losing the *Leonis* and making us a potential enemy. Now If Rapoza's hankering for a top admiral's billet, and if it means hanging you out to dry so he can stick a feather in his own cap, so be it."

"Do they intend to raise Starfleet Order Two-oh-six?" Kirk inquired. He held perfectly still. He knew the look Decker was now giving him, but he carefully held his gaze on Brienzio.

"I don't know what kind of phlegm they're gonna pull out of their throats. Why, what did you beam down for ground forces?"

"Only those for whom there was no other option. The *Leonis's* shuttlecraft were all manned to capacity, and those who were left on board had nowhere else to beam. Matt - that is, Captain Decker - had to move the *Merrimack* out of transporter range to avoid being damaged when the Manticore detonated."

"We'll try to avoid any talk on that point, but if the inquiry raises it, don't forget about that part. Anything else I should know?"

"The security force from the *Merrimack*."

"What security force would that be?" Brienzio directed the question at Decker, who gave Kirk a dirty look and sighed his way into an answer.

"Security personnel I beamed down to protect the *Leonis* survivors from Dimidian attackers," he growled. "At most, there were ten of them. Hardly what I'd call an invasion force."

"Yeah, well, in these halls, perception is nine-tenths of the law. All right, look, I can see we're gonna have some prepping to do before the inquiry, but we're gonna have to remember to raise defense of self and others as a deciding point. Starfleet Order Fourteen along with Section E of the non-interference directive. That'll be hard for any desk commander to ignore, even if it is a turtle like Rapoza."

"I wonder if Areel Shaw will be on the board," Kirk said absently as he and Decker walked across the botanical gardens outside the building.

"I tell you, Matt, if you ever need a smart lady in your corner during a court proceeding - "

"I wish you hadn't said anything, Jim." Decker didn't look at Kirk, but reproachfully shook his head.

"Say it now or say it later," Kirk said, tossing up his hands. "It would have come to light eventually."

"You don't know that. Now I'll have the pleasure of explaining to the board why I beamed down a dozen armed personnel and used particle weapons to shoot up someone else's ground."

"You heard what the commodore said. We acted in self-defense. I was quite prepared to knock out the lot of them with heavy phaser stun before you showed up."

"You'd better be prepared to include that in your testimony."

"Didn't you say something about waiting to see what the Pavoni have to say on our behalf?" Kirk shot him a sidelong look.

"Who knows how long that'll take. They could be in that huddle in Paris for the better part of a week."

"I still don't see the problem with telling the entire truth - "

Decker stopped in his tracks and turned to face Kirk. "Jim, listen to me. You and I both know our careers are on the line because of this, and you've got a lot more ahead of you than I do. With these clowns, it's not about the truth, it's about how they can misinterpret it to suit their own agenda."

"I thought you said you didn't care about their opinions, that you resented playing the role of a diplomat."

"You can tell them the truth until you weigh three hundred pounds and have a beard that reaches from here to Venus. If they're determined to find a way to twist your words and use them against you - "

"You don't have to tell me honesty can be painful sometimes," Kirk said sharply. "Living with it can be even more so. Ben Finney has barely said a word to me since that incident aboard the *Republic*. Do you think I was happy to lose him as a friend?"

"Now what the hell has he got to do with this?"

"Our ship could have been destroyed due to his negligence. I had no choice but to report what I'd discovered. As a consequence, now he hasn't got a snowball's chance in hell to make captain. Knowing I've already killed one friend's career doesn't give me a thrill knowing it might happen again."

"So don't take the chance! Keep it under your hat, make something up!"

"Matt, it's going to come out one way or another! What do you think is going to happen when we say we transported to the surface looking for shelter, and they read us back another man's testimony that we beamed an armed occupation force down there? That's all they would need to charge us with disobeying orders, not to mention perjury!"

"For God's sakes, Jim, you were the one who brought up the order, you tell me what it says."

"No Starfleet officer, regardless of rank, shall assume the authority to invade or occupy a planet, irrespective of the state of diplomatic relations with that planet," Kirk quoted without hesitation. "Such occupation would be considered an act of war, and if committed in time of peace, shall be punishable by dishonorable discharge and confinement of a period to be determined by the convening authority."

"And does the order define an occupying invasion force?" Decker demanded. "Number of personnel? Weaponry? Actions taken upon arrival?"

"No. But I've never served with a more by-the-book officer than you in the fifteen years I've been in this man's Starfleet. It hardly seems worth the effort of trying to hide the whole truth when an opportunist like Rapoza, as you so cynically put it, is bound to skewer the facts and interpret them in a way he finds convenient."

"Well, what was it you said about showing the Dimidians our teeth, or else they'd come back for even more?"

"That was to knock out the missile. Evacuating survivors to the surface wasn't on my sensors then!"

Decker pursed his lips in exasperation and glanced away to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "Look, don't you stand there and tell me you'd just as soon have let those survivors all die just to appease a bunch of goddamned Starfleet bureaucrats."

"That was the *furthest* thing from my mind, Matt," Kirk said vehemently. He looked like he was about to throw a hook at his commanding officer if this escalated much further.

"Then if we were in opposite places, what would you have done?"

"It doesn't matter what I would have done. What matters now is what I'm going to do and what I'm going to say now when the inquiry convenes. The same goes for you and every other officer from both the *Merrimack* and the *Leonis* who's going to be facing that board."

"All right." Decker gesticulated to both sides. "Do as you damn well please. Throw me under the airbus if you think that's the right thing to do. Meanwhile, if you need me, I'll be over at Pub Forty-seven reconsidering whether to recommend you for a promotion."

With that, he turned and stalked away, and left Kirk standing on the path looking like a son who'd just left his father to drown in a maelstrom. Then Kirk sighed and marched off in the opposite direction.

The board of inquiry went more or less as Decker had expected. As senior officer present, he led the procession; half of Rapoza's questions began with "why didn't you" and the other half with either "at what point" or "take us back to." Brienzo hadn't been fooling around: Rapoza, a fiftysomething rear admiral with buzz-cut gray hair, was determined to find a scapegoat for the loss of the *Leonis* on home turf. The other four officers who comprised the board were captains or higher, and all of them wore ornery glares that made Decker think of Bilokersee and his lackeys the first time he'd turned to face them. He opted to confront the board members in similar fashion.

When he came to the part about the Dimidian onslaught on the ground, one of the board members, a fleet captain, narrowed his eyes and asked Decker to describe their weaponry. Decker's reply seemed to propel Rapoza into a forward lean with a scrunched-up scowl.

"Take us back to the point where you beamed down, Captain," he said. "You stated that to halt the Dimidian advance, you fired a blast from a phaser rifle at the ground in front of them."

"That's correct," Decker said unflinchingly.

"From what you're describing, Starfleet weaponry is far superior to anything the Dimidians use. Now tell me, Captain, do you recall Section B, Paragraph Three-A of Starfleet General Order One?"

"Every Starfleet captain knows that order down to every serif on every letter," Decker said, letting his annoyance tinge his voice.

"And what does that paragraph say?"

"Starfleet personnel shall not employ any technology in common use by a spacefaring race in the presence of the inhabitants of a planet who have not yet achieved space travel, or are unaware of civilizations other than their own. This includes but is not limited to particle weapons, communication devices, scanning equipment, medical equipment, or modes of transportation. But in my estimation, Admiral, you've forgotten where that middle part comes into it. The Dimidians damn well knew we were out there, which is why they were preparing in the first place to attack the Pavoni with a weapon of mass destruction - something the Federation has long since learned to do without!"

Rapoza's glance shifted to the tabletop in front of him, and he sat back. "You make a fair point, Captain. However, Section D of General Order One does require a diplomatic approach to be taken ahead of the use of force, regardless of the state of a civilization."

"Captain Sheffield of the *Leonis* had already attempted a diplomatic approach, but the Gesikan faction was having none of it. I saw no alternative but to go in armed and ready for action. But that brings me to another point I'd like to raise, and I think this one equally fair. I won't debate that a diplomatic approach is preferable to a show of force, but such being the case, wouldn't it be better to have a diplomat along to attend to these matters?"

"What's your point, Captain?"

"That's it, that's my point. *I am* the captain of a Federation starship. Three hundred people depend on me to lead them, to decide what actions they're going to take and where their actions will take them, to order them on a precise heading to either life or death, and hope to whatever high power they believe in that they *will* come through it alive. To say nothing of the ship itself, the effort necessary to keep it from flying apart at the junctions whenever we break an orbit. On top of all that, I'm a husband and a father. Just for that, I have to do my damndest to get everyone home alive. That's plenty of responsibility, and frankly, I struggle to understand why Starfleet captains are also expected to be ambassadors and diplomats when we're trained to be explorers and fighters."

"That's a very eloquent and impassioned speech, Captain," Rapoza said, somewhat condescendingly. "However, as the commander of a Federation starship, you *are* charged with deep-space exploration, making contact with new civilizations."

And boldly going where no man has gone before, yeah, yeah, I've heard that one a hundred times already. Decker bit back the rant.

"The Federation diplomatic corps is quite well engaged in maintaining relations with the planets we've already contacted," Rapoza went on. "As this incident has no doubt made you aware, some of those relations are less cozy than others. Therefore, it comes down to the captains and crews of our exploratory corps to carry forth the mission of both Starfleet and the Federation. We must leave newly contacted races with the impression that the Federation is an entity of peace and benevolence. And need I remind you that as such, Starfleet command officers dating back to the time of Jonathan Archer *do*, in fact, receive a certain amount of schooling in diplomacy and political science. You speak of your role as a leader of your men, but are we to believe, Captain, that you're not accustomed to leading by example?"

"Example," Decker repeated. "That's an interesting word to use. It begins with the letter E, which is the section of General Order One dealing with defensive action against hostile forces. I think we've well established that the Dimidians are one of the more hostile races we've encountered in our time, and I am damn sure *not* about to set for my crew the example of letting a hostile race walk all over us or our compatriots." He sat rigidly in the witness chair and glared at Rapoza. Right now, no race was more hostile to him than Rapoza's race to judgment.

There was a long pause. Rapoza shot sideways glances at the pair of officers sitting on either side of him - none of them seemed willing to object to Decker's line of reasoning or his flamboyant forwardness.

"Take us back to the order you issued to the *Merrimack* to fire a phaser blast at the surface," Rapoza said finally. "Your captain's log states that you have issued a standing order to that effect."

"Grateful to say, knock on wood, that was the only time I've had to invoke it."

"To intimidate the Dimidians?"

"To let them know firing high-yield missiles at a neighboring planet wasn't going to achieve their desired end, not as far as the Federation was concerned. Fortunately, my first officer had the presence of mind to bluff them into believing we had all of Starfleet in their orbit, which

inspired me to convince them that we'd keep blasting away at the surface until we hit and destroyed the missile complex they'd taken. Diplomacy or no diplomacy, races like the Dimidians speak a language no universal translator understands. They speak with weapons and threats! They drew first blood when they destroyed the landing party from the *Leonis*, and if I'm to get my ship and crew out of these scrapes alive and intact, you'd better believe I'm going to hit back!"

Following Decker's tirade, Rapoza had so little else to say that one of the fleet captains on the board took up the questioning, steering the inquiry back into the ground confrontation. It struck Decker that he'd treated Bilokersee with even more respect and diplomacy than he'd just handled Rapoza. The questioning didn't last much longer after that; the board seemed even less interested in the negotiations on Delta Pavonis than in the actions he'd taken on and above Dimidium.

His testimony complete, Decker marched into the foyer adjoining the hearing chamber, where several of the *Merrimack* and *Leonis* officers awaited their turn on the stand. He had no problem with letting them see his irritation - as far as he was concerned, this entire process was a waste of time, a belly rub of Rapoza's ego.

"Commander James Kirk, report to the stand," the master-at-arms hollered out the door behind Decker.

Kirk had been standing in a corner, talking to a young woman with short blonde hair, wearing a red uniform. Hearing his name, he patted her on the cheek, gave her a winning smile, and headed for the hearing chamber. Decker gave him a wry look and continued to a table at the far side of the foyer, where Mitchell lounged next to the coffee dispenser.

"Ah, Jim Kirk and his ladies, eh, Gary?" Decker said.

"You know Jim, sir. He'll be chasing tail long after we're both dead." Mitchell had a droll expression as he offered Decker a cup of coffee.

"Any idea who this one might be?"

"I think her name is Ariel something," Mitchell said offhandedly. "She's a Starfleet lawyer."

"Oh, yeah, Areel Shaw. He was hoping she'd show up."

"I bet he'd like her to be with him in there right now." Mitchell nodded toward the door to the hearing chamber. "Do I dare ask how it went, Captain?"

"No, you don't," Decker shook his head emphatically. "You know the drill, Gary, we're not supposed to discuss our testimony out here. But when it comes your turn, just remember, a bunch of blowhard bureaucrats is all they are."

"They used to say there were only two constants in the universe - death and taxes," Mitchell reflected.

"And what do they say now?"

"What they always should have said. There's *three* constants in the universe - death, taxes, and a bureaucratic mentality."

Chapter 4

They waited a day for the board of inquiry to reach a conclusion. Then two, and then three. As the fourth day broke with no news, Decker seethed with impatience. "No news is good news" was another applicable old axiom, but he had infinite other things he'd rather be doing than hanging around Starfleet Headquarters waiting for some word.

It was shortly before forenoon when the intercom in his quarters buzzed, passing along an order for him to report to the Billingsley Auditorium at 1300 hours: uniform of the day was full dress with decorations. *Finally*. He lost no time donning the uniform and repairing to the auditorium, but he couldn't quit mulling over in his mind why he would be summoned to one of the largest auditoriums in Starfleet HQ just to hear the board's conclusions.

Were he and his crew about to be drummed out of the service for the actions they'd taken, with scores of Starfleet personnel bearing witness to their disgrace?

A large gathering of officers of varying ranks and postings milled about the auditorium when Decker arrived, but no one he knew personally. A minute after him, Kirk and Mitchell entered. Then over the next several minutes, Brent, Skappas, LaSalle, and L'Rema - almost everyone who had been on the bridge of the *Merrimack* during the engagement. Only Odax, Forrester, and a couple of lesser mortals were missing, but they, too, showed up in due time along with Dr. Suslowicz.

"Any idea what's going on, Captain?" Brent asked.

Decker shook his head. "Beats hell out of me, Pete. Though the fact that we're all here after that business on Dimidium and facing an inquest for it...."

"Maybe we've just stepped into a lynch mob," Skappas said in a flippant tone. Leave it to him to try and lighten the air with gallows humor.

L'Rema looked up from licking her forearm. "I'm just grateful there's a private sandbox down the hall," she murmured. "If this gives me a bad enough case of the zoomies...."

"Just don't have a hairball on the podium, willya?" Decker told her. He glanced toward the stage at the front of the auditorium as a Starfleet master-at-arms marched in from one side.

"Attention on the deck!" he roared. The scores of officers in the auditorium snapped to, directing their undivided attention at the stage. The only sound was the splash of water from the decorative fountain behind the stage, as a veritable procession of top Starfleet brass marched into view, led by a healthily built, very recognizable man with well-kempt white hair.

"My God, that's Admiral Komack!" LaSalle whispered.

"Maybe George is right," Mitchell muttered to Kirk. "We *are* about to be either hanged or shot."

"Relax, you guys," Decker growled. "We're not dead yet."

Commodore Brienzio was one of the last officers in the procession, which amounted to three admirals, two commodores, and two fleet captains. The master at arms received a legipad from one of the fleet captains, stepped up to the podium, and bellowed: "The following officers will stand front and center. Captain Matthew Decker; Commander James Kirk; Lieutenants Gary Mitchell, Hedrick LaSalle, Peter Brent; Lieutenants J.G. George Skappas and L'Rema; and Dr. Casimer Suslowicz."

Without a word, Decker's officers fell into a column behind him. He led the way up to the stage, where they formed a shoulder-to-shoulder line alongside him. Trepidation was heavy. They had all been present on the *Merrimack* during the Dimidium crisis and could not fathom any other reason why they'd all been summoned at once.

Admiral Komack stepped to the podium and beckoned for Brienzio to join him, facing Decker and his people. "Captain Decker, officers of the *Merrimack*," he began. "I thought you would be interested to know...." He paused for dramatic effect. "That the board of inquiry into your conduct in the Dimidium crisis has been dissolved. The emissaries you ferried from Delta Pavonis to Earth would like to express their strong gratitude for your intercession in this affair. Ambassador Aranias wishes you to be specially commended for your valor and courage in shielding his people from annihilation. Coming from the newest member of the Federation, this is not an inconsequential matter. You will all receive Starfleet's highest accolades, and personal citations to follow." He left a smiling Brienzio standing on the podium with the legipad, and walked over to stand in front of Decker.

"Citation for conspicuous bravery and leadership in action over planet Dimidium." Komack's voice rang off the acoustic reflective wall panels behind the lineup. "Commodore Brienzio, if you please."

"On Stardate One-one-five-seven point four, while in command of U.S.S. *Merrimack*," Brienzio read, "Captain Matthew Decker received a priority emergency signal from U.S.S. *Leonis*...."

Decker all but tuned out Brienzio's recount. He already knew and remembered everything that had happened - he'd outlined it in his log, described it in excruciating detail for that damned useless board of inquiry. What a waste of time - and now dissolved to boot.

But he'd left out one small detail: it still felt to him like he'd ordered a premature reduction in speed before entering orbit, but for which the *Leonis* might have escaped in one piece. Brienzio, however, pointedly skipped that detail as well, instead touting Decker and Kirk's tandem effort to blow the Manticore out of the sky. Decker stared out over the sea of faces eyeing him and the officers lined up beside him: human, Vulcan, Caitian, Andorian or Veloran, they all hung on Brienzio's every word, many of them in awe and some of them even showing a little jealousy. No doubt wished themselves to have been in the right place at the right time. But everyone had a place to be and a time to be there.

"...Captain Decker's actions in the Dimidium crisis, destroying the Manticore and saving the lives of the remaining *Leonis* crew reflect spectacular credit on himself; his first officer, Commander James Kirk; all the officers and crew of the *Merrimack*; and are in keeping the finest traditions of the Federation Star Service," Brienzo finished.

"Attention to orders!" Komack's voice rang out again. "Captain Matthew Roderick Decker, as Chief of Starfleet Operations, it is my distinct pleasure and honor to promote you to the rank of Commodore, with all the rights and privileges thereto. As a consequence of your promotion, you are hereby detached from command of U.S.S. *Merrimack*. At the close of these proceedings, you will report to the Chief of Starfleet Personnel for your next assignment. Congratulations, Commodore Decker." He held out his hand for the shaking, as every other hand within view began to slap together in thundering ovation.

"Thank you, Admiral," Decker said, allowing himself a grateful smile.

"No need to thank me, Matt." Komack smiled back and lowered his voice to a more personal volume. "If anybody, it's the Pavoni you should thank for covering your ass."

As the applause faded away and was again lost under the rushing of the fountain, Komack moved over to stand in front of Kirk. "Citation for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity, above and beyond the call of duty as first officer of U.S.S. *Merrimack*, while in action over planet Dimidium," he resumed. "Commodore Brienzo."

"On Stardate One-one-five-seven point four," Brienzo read, "while serving as first officer of U.S.S. *Merrimack*, Commander James T. Kirk became aware of the crisis surrounding U.S.S. *Leonis* - namely, that that ship's captain, first officer, and landing party had been killed by Dimidian extremists. Upon learning that the extremists were preparing to launch a Manticore interplanetary missile at Delta Pavonis, Commander Kirk volunteered to beam aboard the *Leonis* and assume temporary command. Having taken the conn aboard the the *Leonis*, Commander Kirk received orders from then-Captain Decker aboard the *Merrimack* and outflanked the missile with a barrage of photon torpedoes. However, when the *Leonis* was crippled by ion rockets, Commander Kirk recommended that the *Merrimack* pull the missile onto an altered course, gave orders to shift the ship to a low orbit and for all hands to evacuate in preparation to use the *Leonis* to intercept the missile. Commander Kirk was among the last of the *Leonis* survivors to abandon ship before the *Leonis* intercepted and destroyed the Manticore, with only seconds to spare before impact. Once on the surface of Dimidium, Commander Kirk assumed a defensive posture to protect the *Leonis* survivors from Dimidian extremist ground forces until Captain Decker was able to beam down reinforcements from the *Merrimack*. When faced by hostile forces, Commander Kirk successfully bluffed his attackers into believing that superior Starfleet forces were present."

Here Brienzo paused and glanced toward Kirk, a glint of admiration in his eye. "Commander Kirk's valiant actions spared two hundred Starfleet personnel and two extraterrestrial races from mass destruction and heavy loss of life. He has earned extraordinary credit for himself; his commanding officer, Captain, now Commodore Matthew Decker, and his shipmates; and the admiration and gratitude of the Pavoni race. His actions set a new standard for the most excellent traditions of the Federation Star Service."

This time, Decker fought to hide a smile. He knew what was coming, but if Kirk had any idea, he wasn't letting on.

"Attention to orders!" Komack repeated. He waited for the thud of boot heels to dissipate and stared Kirk steadily in the eye. "Commander James Tiberius Kirk, as Chief of Starfleet Operations, I am most pleased and highly honored to promote you to the rank of Captain, with all rights and privileges thereto. As a consequence of your promotion, you are hereby detached from your duties aboard U.S.S. *Merrimack*. At the close of these proceedings, you will report to the Chief of Starfleet Personnel for further assignment. Congratulations, Captain Kirk."

The auditorium erupted in cheering and applause. For a moment, Kirk seemed at an uncharacteristic loss for words, but presently he took Komack's firm handshake with a deep sigh and a smile. "Thank you, Admiral. Thank you very much."

"You keep on making us proud, Jim," Komack smiled back.

By the time the adulation faded away, Komack was standing in front of Mitchell. As Brienzo began to read the citation, Kirk flicked his gaze sideways toward Decker. "Did you reconsider for very long?" he muttered.

"As long as it took me to knock down one glass of Bolian White," Decker muttered back. "Damned shame we're standing at attention. I would've loved to see the look on your face."

It took another half hour for all citations to be read and all promotions to be announced. Brent, now a lieutenant commander, would also be detached from the *Merrimack* to provide field training for ship-to-ship combat in the outer solar system. Dr. Suslowicz was the only one not to be promoted in rank, but instead notified that he, too, would be detached from the *Merrimack* and transferred to the space psychology staff at Starfleet Medical.

Once Komack had congratulated Suslowicz on his advancement, he turned back to the podium and nodded for Brienzo to stand aside. With a solemn face, he took the legpad between his hands.

"In closing," he intoned, "there will be a posthumous citation for valor awarded to Lieutenant Kenneth Odell, navigation officer of U.S.S. *Leonis*, for halting the Dimidian attack at the cost of his own life. Lieutenant Odell transported the last of the *Leonis* survivors to the surface of Dimidium and returned to the ship's bridge, where he retook what attitude control he had left to maneuver it into the Manticore's trajectory. Lieutenant Odell successfully intercepted the Manticore some three hundred miles above the planet, averting catastrophic destruction on the ground and assuring that neither the Dimidians nor the Pavoni would come to harm. Lieutenant Odell's brave act of self-sacrifice has allowed us all to stand here today, to congratulate his fellow officers on their promotions and to welcome the Pavoni as valued members of the United Federation of Planets."

Here, Komack bowed his head. Every other head in the auditorium followed suit: an unannounced but unanimous moment of silence for Odell's final act. Kirk clenched his jaw, trying to hold his emotions down: it was to him that Odell had bared his soul and lamented his cowardice less than a minute before letting himself die to avoid judgment - and saved billions of lives in the process. Not now in ten millennia would Odell be remembered as a coward. Komack's proclamation would forever elevate him to a selfless hero in the volumes of Starfleet

scholars.

"Thank you all," Komack said finally. "Congratulations to you newly promoted officers, and Godspeed in your journeys to come. These proceedings are now closed." He stepped back from the podium, tucked the legpad under his arm, and in an exact reversal of his entrance, led his entourage back toward the right stage exit. They filed past the *Merrimack* officers, offering each of them congratulations and handshakes in turn, with Brienzio now bringing up the rear. As he reached Decker and Kirk, a sardonic grin seamed his face.

"You guys wanna hear how Rapoza lost his shit when they dissolved his board?" he offered. "Come on down to the Old City Lounge after you see the CSP. I'm buying the first round!"

True to his word, Brienzio bought the first drink for every *Merrimack* crewmember who joined in the celebration - and almost every off-duty crewmember eventually passed through the lounge. Decker and Kirk stood at the bar, accepting the enthusiastic congratulations and well-wishes from their erstwhile shipmates, plus a score of other Starfleet personages who either wanted to extend their wishes or just nab a free drink. Kirk lost track of Brienzio after a while; as it turned out, he'd had to duck into one of the private communication booths to take a transmission from some poohbah in the exploratory precinct of operations.

"Hey, Jim, congratulations!"

Kirk turned away from the bar to greet a broadly smiling, long-striding man in a medical-sciences uniform crossing the crowded lounge toward him. The pale blue eyes twinkled with merriment as they shook hands vigorously and the newcomer gripped Kirk's forearm with his free hand.

"Thanks, Bones," Kirk grinned. "I don't suppose you've got time in for a transfer yet, do you?"

"Well, not yet, but gimme one more outbreak of Rigellian kassaba fever and I'll rate a deep-space assignment."

Kirk turned to Decker, lounging against the bar next to him. "Matt, you know Dr. McCoy, don't you?"

"I believe I do," Decker said as he shook hands with McCoy.

"Congratulations to you as well, sir," McCoy said. "I understand you gents had a helluva time at Dimidium."

"It could have turned out a lot worse than it did," Decker remarked. "Losing the *Leonis* and Rhys Sheffield, though....Wing Four will be feeling that one for a while."

"Mmmm," McCoy acknowledged gravely.

"Care to join us for a drink?" Kirk asked, holding up a whiskey bottle.

"Not unless it's a good old-fashioned mint julep," McCoy said with a grin. "I've got to skedaddle. Thirty physicals to run for an incoming class of fresh cadets, and only this afternoon to do it in."

"Surely you're not suggesting there's a better man for the job," Kirk ribbed him.

"I'm a doctor, not a computer programmer," McCoy replied gruffly. "But I'll try and catch up with you before you put to space."

"You know where to find me," Kirk smiled.

"Take it easy, Jim." Nodding to Decker, McCoy added, "Commodore," and turned to exit the lounge.

"Doctor," Decker said with a responding nod. After McCoy had gone, he regarded Kirk curiously. "Where *is* he going to find you, anyway?"

"I drew a light escort cruiser, the *Tecumseh*," Kirk answered. "From the sound of it, I've got plenty of convoy duty to look forward to in the Aldebaran sector."

"Ah, convoy duty," Decker said with mock wistfulness, leaning backward on the bar. "The janitorial services of deep-space operations. Still, it beats hell out of running a division desk." He looked up and noted Brienzio's annoyed look as he returned from booth to bar with a portable communicator in his hand.

"Yeah," the senior commodore was saying. "Okay. I'll pass it to my personnel officer and see what I can do about arranging a replacement. Brienzio out." He shut the communicator off with a loud sigh, leaned on the bar, and glanced at Kirk and Decker's nearly empty glasses. Looking even more annoyed than a moment ago, he held up his communicator and hollered at the bartender: "You see this? This comes with a phaser! Now can we get another round?"

"Good one, Ray," Decker chuckled.

"Another destroyer skipper relieved for cause?" Kirk surmised.

"Nah, not that bad, I guess," Brienzio said. "Chris Pike is bringing the *Enterprise* home from a fiver. They're bumping him up to fleet captain, and that damn tired old ship of his is headed in for a general overhaul. Probably take the better part of a year. Half her crew's getting rotated to other duty, and since they're giving you command of Division Two - " he nodded at Decker - "who the hell else have I got to take the *Enterprise* when she's ready?"

"Why not give her to Jim here?" Decker suggested. "Hell, if I'd known you were gonna need him, I would have recommended him right off."

Kirk laughed. "Captain of the *Enterprise*, at my age? I haven't even been a captain for half a day, Matt. I should be so lucky as to get command of a ship that size."

"Hey, don't you sell yourself short," Brienzio told him. "One or two good deployments on the *Tecumseh* ought to cinch it for you - and who knows, the *Enterprise* might be ready for you by the time you put back in."

"Any ideas in the meantime?" Decker asked.

There was a pause. Brienzio took a refilled glass from the nervous-looking bartender, stared into it for a moment, then looked up at Decker. "Well, after the way you handled the Dimidium mess, there's a good chance I can shake things up a little," he said thoughtfully. "You're a damn sight more useful in a command chair than a desk chair, Matt. As low on qualified captains as we are, I can probably finagle you taking over the *Enterprise* when you come back from your leave. My personnel officer's got a way with fudging duty assignments so good officers get jobs they're qualified for and flag bozos like Rapoza don't get in over their heads."

"I have to hand it to you, Ray," Decker commented. "All that time behind a division desk has given you a hell of a lot better handle on Starfleet politics than most of us will ever have."

"Yeah," Brienzio grumbled. Clearly, he saw Decker's point, but considered his duty a thankless one all the same. "Well, a man's got to believe in something, I believe I'll have another beer." He smiled sarcastically, hefted his newly filled glass, and moved off to mingle with some of the other *Merrimack* officers.

Kirk didn't quite get a chance to ask him just how his personnel officer could arrange to change Decker's assignment. Instead he turned to Decker and remarked: "Well, well, Commodore Decker of the starship *Enterprise*. I have to say I'm a little jealous, Matt. I can't think of a more prestigious posting."

"Oh, I can hardly wait to see how much work she needs when she puts in for refit," Decker said facetiously. "She always seems to get a hard case like Bob April or Chris Pike in that big chair. But I reckon she'll be a damn sight more comfortable than the old *Merrimack*." He took a sip of his whiskey just before a youthful, smoked voice spoke up from right beside them.

"Excuse me, Commodore. Just wanted to offer my congratulations."

Decker looked at the young man who had appeared at his shoulder and his face suddenly brightened in pleased recognition. "And I'll take 'em in spades!" he said, grinning broadly as he pumped the young man's hand with enthusiasm. "Well, well, how has the great black beyond been treating you?"

"Fine, sir. Just fine."

Decker clapped him on the arm and turned to Kirk. "Jim, I'd like you to meet my son, Will. He's been out of the Academy a little over a year now, junior computer-science officer on the *Perry*."

"How do you do, Captain," Will Decker said, proffering his hand.

"A pleasure, Mr. Decker," Kirk smiled. "Looking forward to serving alongside the old man one of these days?"

"If that's what Starfleet Command has in mind for me," Will grinned. "And then only if they relax the rules regarding family members serving together on the same ship."

"I suppose your mother wouldn't much care for it either, both her men facing the same dangers together," Kirk said jocularly.

Jocularly or no, he sensed the wrong turn he'd taken when he saw both father and son suddenly turn grave. Will shifted his feet and glanced uncomfortably at his father, who had gone abruptly stiff.

"Well, she may not have the time," Decker clarified finally. "She's very sick, I mean *very*. It's the damndest thing. Just when they've finally eradicated illnesses like leukemia, extraterrestrial diseases come along with the same effects to replace it."

"I, ah....I'm sorry, Matt." Kirk lowered his eyes sincerely. "I had no idea."

"It's all right, Jim, don't worry about it. Excuse us for a second, would you please?" Kirk nodded and Decker took his son's arm gently, walking down to a vacant end of the bar where they turned face to face.

"Okay, Will, let's have it. How is your mother?"

Will's face darkened with anguish as he looked up. "She's not doing good at all, Dad. In fact, the last I heard from Brandi, she maybe had only a few weeks left. Veloran blood plague is....well, the cure's yet to be found even on its home planet. If it infects a human, the survival rate....it's pretty much nil."

"Damn." Decker looked away and stared hard at the floor. "Brandi's still at home with her, then?"

"Yeah. I've been trying to get home as much as possible to give her a hand."

"All right, Will, listen. In case you missed it, this promotion came with a month of shore leave before I take my transfer. I'll get you some family medical leave as well, privilege of rank. She's never stopped worrying about either of us, so let's you and I get back out to the homestead. We'll....we'll try and give her some peace of mind."

"Peace. That's the one thing we never have enough of."

Decker patted him on the shoulder. They moved back along the bar toward Kirk, who now stood chatting easily with Mitchell, most likely conspiring to head to some lavishly furnished nightclub for an after-party. If those two wound up serving on the same ship, the shenanigans on some far-off planet inhabited by promiscuous alien women would become the stuff of legend in a hurry. Thinking about it, Decker wouldn't put it past them to abandon ship somewhere in the Orion system and open up for private business. Kirk's charms had even won the day on contact missions to planets with matriarchal societies, and Decker had heard it speculated in the senior officers' wardroom on the *Merrimack* that an Orion woman was one test Kirk had yet to face. Put him and Mitchell together on such a test, and....

"Well, it's time we weighed anchor," Decker announced rather than finish the thought. "Got some family business to attend to. As for you two, stay the hell out of trouble now, willya?"

"Oh, surely not us, Commadore," Mitchell said with an innocent smile, folding his arms. "Not so long as our illustrious Captain Kirk here remembers not to let his unlimited power go to his head. One never knows what can happen if someone comes to even greater power and has no scruples about using it."

"Good advice, Jim," Decker said matter-of-factly. "Don't let Gary here too far out of your subspace range."

"Oh, I have no intention of that," Kirk said. "One privilege of rank I intend to exercise is asking that Gary be assigned to the *Tecumseh* before I read my command orders."

"Oh, God," Decker murmured. "God help us all."

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Father and son transported up to the *Merrimack* late that afternoon to give Decker a chance to collect the last of his personal belongings, before beaming back down to a transporter station in Milwaukee and embarking on a high-rail journey up toward Green Bay. Night had fallen by the time they got there - early autumn around the Great Lakes was still not a particularly sunny time of year. Will spent much of this leg of the journey regaling his father on his last deployment aboard an escort frigate assigned to the Gliese sector. The air taxi they took from Green Bay to Lakewood had a comfortable private seating compartment above and aft of the cockpit, where they discussed the extraterrestrial illness that was slowly draining the life out of Will's mother. When they reached the old homestead, Decker felt abominably hungry - but after what he and Will had spoken of, eating wasn't even on the sensor array until he'd seen what his wife was going through.

Maria Trask had been a promising young naturalist and a student at Cornell University when she met Matthew Decker, a cum-laude Starfleet cadet on his science rotation, on a 2236 exobiology mission in the Octantis sector. After they were married in 2239 in a low-key Starfleet ceremony, the Decker homestead had begun as a vacant parcel of land abutting some repatriated Menominee territory. As Decker gained seniority in Starfleet and Maria's name gained more prominence in exobiology circles, they'd found this an incredibly ideal spot to build a home and start a family. At first Maria spent her days exploring the Menominee wilderness, listening to the flora and fauna and hearing the stories of the mass extinction event that had narrowly been averted - ironically enough - by World War III. Before Will was born, she'd even joined her husband on one more short exploratory mission and gathered extraterrestrial plant life to see if it would be adaptable to Earth's ecosystem. Some experiments had gone better than others; she'd ended up building a small arboretum down the hill from the house, where she could safely ascertain whether or not an alien plant species was invasive or harmful before it got loose. The arboretum still stood, and Will requested the air-taxi pilot to drop them between the arboretum and the house, as long as the moon was shining brightly.

The east end of the arboretum still had its runium lunar panels for a roof, which nourished the Vendelian ringnut shrubs Maria had watched for three days and three nights to determine that they could only photosynthesize moonlight. With a proper root system, the nuts they produced were a rich natural source of potassium and iron for most carbon-based life forms. Just outside the arboretum stood her proudest discovery - a Murkish giant bluewood. Its species was native to the high temperate forests of Murka IV, but if Maria had one claim to fame, she'd found that the 500-meter trees craved carbon dioxide - they could thrive on Earth and purify its air to a whole new degree if their soil was appropriately treated.

As the Decker men walked through the arboretum, the moon hit the transparent panels of the midsection and illuminated a tall, thin shrub that was well cordoned off from the other vegetation and passers-by. Here Will paused, explaining to his father that this was the culprit, a Veloran redstalk. *That* plant was a warning, the only reason Maria had kept it around. *That* plant, growing in the sandy loam in which she'd rooted it, had begun to exude a toxic oil from its stalk that Maria had only identified when a bare spot on her back accidentally came into contact with it. The oil burned her skin, admitting a pathogen that took over a month to incubate before the Veloran blood plague began to consume her platelets and dry out her blood vessels. Leukemia was history, now this filthy alien disease, eating up Maria Trask's life in similar fashion, was news.

The house, at least, was just as Decker remembered it, with its two stories, its wide veranda and its exponential advantage over his quarters aboard the *Merrimack*. Maria's rock garden looked unchanged in the moonlight, sprawling out behind the house and gradually narrowing into a stone-lined path leading down to the lake that lay between the homestead and the Menominee wilderness. A three-seat dinghy rested on the shore beside the path, covered in a weatherproof shroud.

Father and son crossed the veranda to the kitchen door and passed inside. Some of the cookware and kitchen gadgets had been rearranged, but the table and chairs were in the same place as always: and then in came Louie, investigating these large bipedal invaders who had just entered his home, and pausing to stare at Decker as if to demand "and where have *you* been?"

"Ah, Louie, you look just like my old communications officer with less hair," Decker chuckled. "Sure you're not an ancestor of the Caitians?"

Will smiled, but Louie just ambled over to dive into his kibble bowl. Then heavier footsteps emanated from the lounge abutting the kitchen, quick anticipatory footsteps, footsteps light and tapping yet somewhat erratic. Only one person's feet could be falling. And then, there she was, with her curly blonde hair, her wide smile and her glittering but anguished blue eyes.

"*Dad!*" she gasped as she set forth from the doorway.

"Ah, there's my Brandi, Brandi the beautiful!" Decker greeted her with his arms wide open and his kiss firm on her cheek. "My God, look at you. I didn't authorize you to become a woman!"

"Some things you just don't have authority over, father dear," Brandi said with a forced giggle.

"And some things he does," Will was still smiling. "Dad's been promoted. I may now address him as 'Commodore'."

"How wonderful," Brandi said, appraising her father admiringly. "How did all this come to pass?"

"I'll tell you about it at dinner time," Decker said. "But right now, I'm here for one and only one reason."

Brandi's face fell, and she inhaled deeply. "I know. I think you're just in time."

At the top of the stairs, Will touched his father's arm. "She can barely see anymore," he muttered. "Better if you say something to her so she knows it's you."

"Trust me, Will, there's plenty I want to say to her while I still can."

Brandi entered the den first, and Decker held his breath, not sure what to behold. But what he did see flattened his spirits: slumped in her favorite swing chair, which had evidently been moved inside from the veranda, Maria already looked like a ghost, a vanishing ghost, a ghost down to its vanishing skeletal remains. She had almost no coloring left, her breathing was shallow and her arms were shriveled, the blanket that covered her lower body looked completely level. She turned her head slowly as she heard people coming into the room.

"Brandi...." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Is....is there another blanket floating around somewhere? There can't be enough warmth in here."

"Maybe there is," Brandi said gently. "I brought someone to see you." She moved an ottoman over next to Maria's chair.

Decker sat on the ottoman and took Maria's wraithlike hand in both of his own. "Honey, I'm home," he murmured. "The potato's in the pot."

Maria's eyes opened - they were bulging from her shrinking face and they were dusty and pale, but they lit with a sudden sparkle and she lifted her head from its pillow. "Matthew!" she breathed, turning her head to bring her eyes to as much focus as she could muster. "It *is* you, Matthew....is the water luke-warm?"

"You hit the mark," Decker smiled. "Need to use the john?"

Maria gave what she could for a soft laugh at the biblical in-joke that had endured through their marriage. She reached up with a trembling hand and touched the side of his head. "Oh, Matthew, what's Starfleet doing to you? Look at all this gray of yours."

"It's a sign of wisdom and experience in some cultures, you know." Decker laid his hand over hers. "Your Murkish bluewood is shading the entire house now, and have you seen its bark lately? Gray as an overcast sky."

"I see so little now," Maria whispered. "I see Brandi near me, I see you and Will in the stars when I close my eyes, I see....I see that Veloran redstalk behind me, waiting to stab me in the back." She laid her head back and blinked slowly with a sigh. "I'm so glad you're home, Matthew. I needed to see something to give me joy. How long do you have with us this time?"

Decker became conscious that Will and Brandi had both left the room. "I'll be on shore leave for a month. I'm taking over a new ship, but it's going to be in spacedock for a few more months of refit time. So I'm going to take whatever time I can get to be here with you." He bowed his head and shook it. "God damn it, Maria, who said it had to lead to this? I never met a woman who loved nature and ecology like you do, how did it have to wind up here?"

"Shush, shush, shush, Matt. No more of that. Just give me one more thing to be happy about, I don't care what, just let me remember what being happy felt like."

Tears sprang to Decker's eyes. He gazed at her and gently patted her hand. "I'll be around as long as I need to be, then," he pledged. "I'll find something. If that's the last thing you want, then damn it, I'm not leaving here until it's done."

When Maria next drifted off, Decker returned downstairs to find Will and Brandi setting out a couple of large baking dishes bearing brook trout, butternut squash and German-style potato salad. Louie was contentedly noshing on some minced salmon, and Tina, his white-socked sister, showed an observable interest in the meal the humans had been preparing.

"Let me tell you kids something," Decker said dryly, regarding the cats. "Once you've served with Caitians, you can't help wondering what insidious schemes are forming in the minds of domestic cats."

"We've got a couple of Caitians on the *Perry*," Will said. "I happen to think the reverse is true, domestic cats prepare you for the mood swings Caitians can have."

"But they're such a sweet, affectionate people all the same, aren't they?" Brandi ventured.

"I guess when they want to be."

Decker sat at his accustomed old spot on one side of the table and procured the potato salad as Will and Brandi sat across from him. "Now tell *me* something, Brandi," he said. "Just tell me one thing that'll make your mother happy now."

"She's just happy that you're home, Dad," Brandi said earnestly. "I know she is."

"So do I, but that's not enough." Decker looked at her inquisitively. "Can she withstand a transporter beam?"

Brandi eyed her still-empty plate, folding, unfolding and refolding her hands underneath her chin. "In her condition, I'm not sure. I'd have to talk to her doctor about it...."

"What did you have in mind?" Will asked.

"Well, how long has she been up there in the den?" Decker queried.

"I'm not counting anymore." Brandi gulped. "Weeks, anyway. Maybe a month or so."

"Well, I've never known a human who loved being out in the middle of nature more than your mother, and there's one place comes to my mind where she's never been happier. You know that island out on the lake, the one with the oak glade?"

Will smiled and nodded. "Her favorite place to listen to the wind and the water. I think that's where she feels most at peace. I think we...." His voice trailed off as he looked aside. Brandi was doubling over, covering her face with both hands and breaking down sobbing. At once her

brother leaned over to hug her as her father rushed around the table to offer his own consolation.

"Why is this happening to us," she cried. "Why does Mother have to die and why do we have to watch her die like this and why is there still all this disease and fighting and *death* after all these years!"

"I don't know, sweetheart," Decker muttered in a thick voice as he rubbed her shoulders gently. "God help me, I don't know. Times I think I joined Starfleet just to pluck around and find out, but....damn it, I still haven't." He paused and sighed as Brandi sniffled loudly and rubbed her nose. "Listen, Will, as long as we're both on leave, let's raise Starfleet Medical and talk to an expert on extraterrestrial diseases, see if we can't make things a little more peaceful for your mother."

Will nodded. He didn't speak, but tears were filling his eyes as well. An easy time this wouldn't be for any of them. He couldn't fathom how his father was maintaining his composure and his ability to make decisions and give directions, but neither could he know how hard Matthew Decker was fighting to keep his agony from overpowering him.

Who was that man? The one talking to mother? He'd been here before. Mother was always here. But the man - he'd been here sometimes. Then he was gone again. He never stayed long. Mother's friend? She usually seemed upset with him when he visited. She seemed unhappy to see him now. But now....now no friend....no upset....no trouble with mother....time....to sleep.

Carol Marcus carefully leaned over the playpen. Little David was out like a light. She turned away and carefully crossed the room back to where Jim Kirk stood beside the door. He'd just given her his news and she'd just renewed her wishes.

"How's he learning?" Kirk asked in a low voice.

"Oh, he's ahead," Carol said with half a smile. "He's well ahead. He can read already, he's finding his way around home computers. I think if anything, when he comes of age, he'll be much better suited to the Silicon Valley Institute than to Starfleet Academy."

"Well, ultimately it's his choice," Kirk said. "You should give him a chance to collate all the available data before he makes it."

"Why are you so worried about his future all of a sudden?" Carol asked pointedly. "It took you almost two years just to acknowledge his existence."

"Things change," Kirk said sagely. "Assignments, missions, life circumstances. I'm about to assume my first command, Carol. There's no telling what will happen in my future, let alone David's. And I...I want him to *have* a future."

"Then do as I ask. Leave us in peace, just leave us out of your life. You chose Starfleet, like you always do. You always choose Starfleet over the people who share your life. And now that Starfleet's planned it for you, go out there and live it. Take care of your people and let me take care of my son."

"He's as much my son as yours." Kirk's eyes flashed with animosity. "If you want me to stay away, then I will, but just...." Kirk glanced toward the sleeping toddler in the playpen. "Don't let him forget where he came from, Carol. Please."

"Go look at him, Jim." Carol cocked her head. "Go take a good, long look at him."

Light on his feet, Kirk complied. He eased over to the playpen and stared at the small boy, the head of curly blond hair, the half-open mouth emitting soft snores. "He looks incredibly like you already," Carol said. "I can never look at his face without seeing yours. I can never forget where he came from....and where I don't want him to go."

"It's up to him," Kirk reiterated. "When he comes of age, when he chooses his path, to whatever end it may lead him, it's his choice. Remember that." Kirk turned away from the playpen and trod softly back toward the door, turning to face her.

"Goodbye, Carol," he said, gripping her shoulders. "Take good care of our son, but let him take control of his own destiny."

Carol pushed her hair away from her face and stared down at the floor between his feet, out of responses, just wishing he would leave. Seeing her anguished expression and her folded arms, Kirk turned from her, passed through the door, and was gone.

"Matthew?"

Maria's eyes opened and she peered about the den, looking disoriented. Decker, sitting on the chaise reading a book he'd picked up again after Dimidium, arose and went over to her. This time she seemed to know he was there, who he was, as soon as he took hold of her hands.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Like I'm visiting Andoria," she murmured.

"Well, we won't go visiting any supermassive ice cubes like that, not this time. But we do have a visit planned." Decker crossed to the open door and called for Brandi. Then he headed over to a communication panel on the sideboard.

"Norpin Alpha Transport Control, this is Commodore Decker," he hailed. "Stand by to beam three personnel to prearranged coordinates."

Brandi came over to Maria and took her by one hand and arm. "If you can still stand, Mom, now's the time," she said.

"Are we....going somewhere?" Maria's face was full of concern.

"A special surprise," Brandi smiled. "We talked to Dr. Erban and he gave his approval for a short transporter hop."

"Not beaming me into outer space now, are you?" Maria asked facetiously.

"Perish the thought," Decker replied. "Besides, if we were, would we be going out there with you?" He held her other hand and arm opposite Brandi.

"This is Dad's idea," Brandi added. "And I happen to think it's a great one." Gently, gingerly, she and Decker helped Maria to stand - disturbingly, she was down to featherweight, even lighter than the last time Brandi had helped her out of that chair.

"Norpin Alpha Transport Control to Commodore Decker," came the voice of the transporter operator. "Coordinates are set, standing by for your word."

"Energize," Decker answered. He eased his arm around Maria and held her close to him as the transporter beam took them away, to a freshly tuned-up pattern buffer in an orbiting transport platform. Then, on to their destination it turned them.

Will looked up from the stump upon which he'd been splitting firewood with a polished axe, as he heard the air displacement of the beam. He laid the axe aside, walked around the bonfire he'd been building in the middle of the glade, and greeted the trio as they materialized. Maria saw him first, looked past him at the fire: she was unable to discern her surroundings, but as she looked blankly around, it dawned on her where she was. She took as deep a breath as she could in her condition and expelled it in a joyful cry.

She hadn't thought a visit to her favorite island possible anymore. Brandi could have handled the dinghy easily enough, but Maria was in no shape to take even two steps out of the house. Even now she was overwhelmed by emotion, losing her footing and almost falling flat before her family hastened to prop her up. The breeze and the ripples on the lake felt and sounded the same as they always had, the trees formed the same old familiar glade. Her island, her place of happiness.

"Come on, Mom," Will said. "We've got you." He guided her forward and toward his wood-splitting stump, where all three of them helped Maria to walk over and sit. She pulled her thick blanket close around her and shuddered, rocked back and forth as the wind touched her and the fire warmed her, and her husband and children gathered around her, offering her their own warmth.

"Remember the first time we all shared a fire out here?" Decker asked her.

"I was four," Brandi giggled. "And I was halfway through the bag of marshmallows before anyone knew it."

"Holy terrors, the lot of you," Maria smiled as she rocked back and forth to warm herself. "I...Matthew, I remember something, something that was always in the back of my mind when we came out here for a firepit."

"I'm all ears," Decker said.

She looked straight at him, her eyes dusty but intense. "When I'm gone....don't feed me to those flames. Do you understand? Don't cremate me. Lay me to rest here. I love this earth, I love all its life and all the life on every planet we've visited. And I want to be part of it for eternity - I want my mortal remains to nourish this earth. It's untiringly nourished us for so many ages....it's the least that I can give back."

Decker clenched his jaw almost as tightly as his eyelids. His wife had just made a last dying request of him and he still was just as disbelieving as Brandi that it was coming to this. He was a Starfleet flag officer - damned if he was going to break down and cry, much less in front of his children. Finally he nodded his head.

"I swear we'll let you rest where you love being the most. If it's right where we're sitting now....well, that's why I brought you out here in the first place."

"This *was* your idea, Matthew," Maria breathed, as if the fact of it came as no surprise to her. "And Brandi's right, it *was* a good one."

"Couldn't think of anywhere you'd be happier to be," Decker said offhandedly.

"Because there isn't anywhere....just here....my island....the whole earth."

Will turned to throw a couple more logs on the bonfire. "I don't want to be a wet blanket, but....can you stay out here for very long?" he asked apprehensively.

Maria had closed her eyes, but she smiled. "Son, if I want to, I can stay out here until the earth takes me back," she told him. "Just let me sit for now....enjoy the air and the water and being with all of you....just let me enjoy being happy, one last time."

Dampness was visible under her eyelids. By now, there were no dry eyes left around that warm, comforting bonfire on that serene island, that peaceful bastion of nature. Will fed the fire, Brandi hugged Maria close, and Matthew crouched next to her, holding her hand. Suddenly, his mission in life had become very clear to him, as he whiled away his wife's dying days in the natural world she so loved.

Maria died ten days later. There were no signs that the transportation had worsened her condition, but she'd had to take to permanent bed rest afterward, and her suffering ended beside her husband. At first Decker shed nary a tear - he had known how long it was coming, the misery with which she was now finished. It was when Brandi came into the den and found Maria lifeless on the chaise beside him, and burst into inconsolable tears, that he almost lost his own composure. Will wouldn't find out till later in the day: he'd been preparing the spot on the island where they had taken Maria to enjoy her beloved environment one last time, for the fire had softened the ground and fertilized the soil, just as Maria would have enthusiastically explained it.

That was where they prepared to bury her - traditionally as anyone else throughout the history of humanity. It was a dying request that was eminently honorable. Will took care of digging the grave as Matt and Brandi welcomed Maria's old friends, colleagues and prominent members of the science community to pay their last respects in her rock garden. The greetings and the recollections of her life kept Brandi

occupied, and she managed to hold herself together, but it still wasn't lost on her that soon her father and brother would be returning to duty and she would be on her own for the first time.

They loaded the old dinghy with the degradable wooden casket carrying Maria's remains and as many rocks as it could hold, and out to the island they rowed, where Will awaited them in the midst of the glade next to the open grave. He had even prepared a headstone, using an acid imprinter to engrave the date of his mother's passing into the rest of the inscription. All three of them took turns scooping dirt back into the ground on top of the casket - though Brandi could barely hold the spade. At last, the grave refilled to ground level, they gathered scores of rocks from both the dinghy and the shore of the island to cover the mound of earth. There together they all stood, as they'd known for over a year they must, and offer one last farewell. As the sun touched the hills one more time, the three of them stood there in silence, reflecting, ruminating, missing.

Matt Decker could have been standing at that headstone for an hour and not reread the words engraved on it. The inscription had burnt everlastingly in his memory. He looked from the top of the stone to the rock-covered mound of earth sprawling at its base, and still he didn't look at the words. Right now, the reminder was too painful.

**MARIA LOUISA
TRASK DECKER
July 21, 2217
October 1, 2263
Lover of Nature
Loved by Man**

Beside him, Brandi rubbed her wet eyes. Opposite, a slight crinkle sounded as Will lifted a small slip of paper from his side. He read the paper aloud in a soft voice, but the tremor was still there: Matt could just discern it over the light breathing of the wind through the trees.

"Do not stand at my grave and weep," Will murmured. "I am not there; I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow. I am the sun on ripened grain, I am the gentle autumn rain. When you awake in the morning's hush, I am the swift, uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight; I am the soft stars that shine at night. Do not stand at my grave and cry; I am not there. I did not die."

Matt fought the rising lump in his throat as Will lowered the poem from his flooding eyes. Then Brandi began to cry. Matt pulled her close and kissed the side of her head, fighting both the lump and the tears in his own eyes. It was too much for Will, and he sidestepped over to both of them, joining in the embrace. They stood together in silence and listened to the wind, listened to the rustling leaves and grass. To Matt it felt as if he could hear Maria's voice whispering over the fronds, but for Will, the wind reminded him almost too vividly of his mother's hand on his cheek. And all Brandi could feel was Maria combing her hair from the time when it was long enough to comb.

As Matthew Decker hugged both his children and Brandi cried on his shoulder, at last he, too, broke. All three of them stood together weeping and clinging to each other, weeping despite their unquestionable Starfleet marks for courage, weeping despite what the poem had told them.

At last Matt pulled himself together and ground his teeth. "She is what she loved the most," he told Will and Brandi, fighting to get his voice under control. "She loved the earth....and now she's part of it. She never wanted it any other way. There's one last thing we can do for her now, Will. One last thing to make her happy."

"What's that?" Will gulped.

"Keep our worlds safe. Whether it's Earth or Alpha Centauri or Canopus - never let any of them come to harm. Next time someone comes to one of our planets with destruction on his mind....make sure he never gets past the Deckers."

Chapter End Notes

"Immortality", first written by Clare Harner in 1934, is the poem Will reads at his mother's burial.

Chapter 6

Kirk studied the polished, edged sword blade in the light angling through the windows of his apartment. He smiled to himself. Hundreds of years past, men assuming command of wooden sailing warships would wear a weapon very much like this one, a straight, medium-weight longsword made from stainless steel. They would fight enemy captains with it, capture the enemy ship and take it as a prize by one swipe of that glittering sliver of death. Kirk rubbed the flat side of the sword with his fingers and ruminated on what it must have been like, swashbuckling about the high seas with that weapon on your belt, fighting at close quarters with a man whose skill you couldn't possibly anticipate until you were face to face with him. Maybe he would find out soon. The *Tecumseh* was to fill the same role as escort frigates of the old sailing days, maybe even some Orion pirates were out there waiting to tangle with it - and with him.

The door chime rang, and Kirk glanced obliquely toward it, continuing to fondle the antique sword. "Come," he responded.

In came Mitchell, looking rather sober - not just in the absence of intoxication, but much more low-spirited than Kirk was used to seeing him.

"Hi, Gary," Kirk greeted him. "Ready for the big day next week?"

"Well, I was," Mitchell murmured with a second's glance at the sword in Kirk's hands. "Promise not to behead the messenger?"

"That depends. What's the message?"

"Admiral Fitzgerald's flag lieutenant was having a heart-to-heart with the *Tecumseh's* first officer in the lounge this afternoon. Sounds like you won't be getting that ship after all, Jim. They're giving it to Gionet."

"Pierre Gionet?" Kirk repeated, half disbelieving. "He was a class behind me, and he was in the second quarter of it!"

"Like I said, don't behead the messenger," Mitchell said, staring at the sword and waving his hands as if to surrender. "And don't ask the messenger where the message comes from. That's all I caught from them. Gionet is taking command of the *Tecumseh* on the same day you were supposed to."

Kirk sheathed the sword and stalked across the room to replace it on its display rack. "Relax, Gary, you're safe," he assured him. "I know who I need to ask about this."

Ray Brienzio braced himself as he plopped down behind his desk - rare were the times anymore when he could actually sit down without receiving a call from the outer office, almost as if his yeoman was lying in wait to forestall his relaxing. Sure enough, he had just shifted all his weight into the desk chair when the intercom buzzed.

Sighing, he laid a hammer blow on the button. "What?" he demanded irritably.

"Captain Kirk would like to see you, sir," the yeoman informed him in a subdued tone.

"Yeah, I figured he might," Brienzio grumbled. "All right, get him in here."

He not only thought Kirk might want to see him, he correctly assumed he'd be incensed. Kirk was practically in a huff as he marched into the office, tossing up his hands.

"Would you mind telling me what this is all about, Commodore?" he asked.

"Well, maybe if you wouldn't mind telling me how you got wind of it three days before you were supposed to," Brienzio returned.

"Word gets around even - or especially - when it's supposed to be hushed up. Now why is my command being turned over to a man who's junior to me by a class and a half?"

"Sit down, Jim." The mordant look on Brienzio's face indicated that it wasn't a request. Kirk sat, staring expectantly, as Brienzio leaned over the desk and sighed, staring at the desktop for a long moment.

"Matt's wife died a couple of weeks ago," he explained. "They extended his leave, another month for bereavement. He won't be able to take the *Enterprise* when she comes into Spacedock." He eyed Kirk for a moment, then continued: "So, now that he's out, and Chris Pike is taking command of a training squadron, the selection list for starship command is about half a dozen shorter. The name at the top of the list to take over the *Enterprise* was James T. Kirk."

There was a long silence. Kirk breathed in, breathed out, slowly. He wanted to ask Brienzio when he'd intended to tell him about the assignment change, but he'd just rendered the question academic. He stared at the top of Brienzio's desk, then finally said: "I see. I take it she'll be entering Spacedock on schedule, then?"

"Yeah, in two weeks. They're cutting your orders right now. Take the overhaul time to learn your way around the ship, meet your senior officers, train your crew, all that happy horse shit. They already promoted Spock, that Vulcan-human scientist guy, to be first officer."

"Oh, yes, I know Spock," Kirk smiled. "First met him aboard the *Enterprise*, in fact, during the episode with the deuterium refinery. He's a good friend. Which reminds me - is there any chance of hanging onto Gary Mitchell as my navigation officer?"

Brienzio nodded. "I'll tend to it. You know, Jim, I don't think we've ever had a man your age in command of a starship before. You really clinched it in that crazy-assed missile action above Dimidium."

"Well, I definitely can't claim all the credit for other men's work," Kirk said demurely. He paused, his mouth hanging open as if to add something. "Speaking of other men's work, what about Matt Decker? Will this end up damaging his career?"

"Family emergencies never killed a man's career that I can think of. Don't worry about him. The *Constellation's* on her way back in from a border patrol, and she's gonna need a couple of months' refit time as well. I'll have Matt take her out for her next fiver. As a matter of fact, you'll be doing the same with the *Enterprise* if you're up for it."

"A five-year exploratory mission?" Kirk's face brightened.

Brienzio could see him trying to contain his kid-at-a-birthday-party excitement. He chuckled and nodded. "I know what you said about being captain of the *Enterprise* at your age, but I got news for you, Jim - that's how it's shaped up. You'll be out there for five years, so you better go get her ready."

In unison, Brienzio and Kirk rose and shook hands across the desk. "Thank you, sir," Kirk said. "I do believe this will be a mission to remember."

"Be a damn disappointment otherwise," Brienzio said with a dry smile. "Good luck and have fun."

"I intend to. Goodbye, Commodore." Nodding in farewell, Kirk turned to leave.

"Hey, Jim," Brienzio called after him. "The *Enterprise* is a damn fine ship. Make sure you take good care of her."

"I certainly will." Kirk smiled gamely. And out of the office he went, radiating energy Brienzio had never seen in him before.

Christopher Pike stood at the railing of the observation deck overlooking the *Enterprise's* shuttle hangar. He smiled wistfully as he looked over the three hundred or so faces watching him from the hangar deck and the observation deck. Spock stood beside him, impassive as always, but Pike could swear he sensed some undetectable sorrow in the man. Not that he could fault him - he'd known Spock for a long time and he'd be feeling his own sense of loss, doubtless far greater than what Spock might experience.

"Well, my friends," he addressed the crew of the *Enterprise*, "I guess this is goodbye, at least as your commanding officer. We've carried each other through more than I can remember. But we've had some special moments that I can never forget, whether it was in action or just hanging out on a starbase messing around with Vulcan blunt-force instruments." He stole a sideways glance at Spock and smiled as he caught that cocking eyebrow. "Whether you're staying aboard *Enterprise* or taking transfers, I leave you with all the good wishes my heart can muster. I'm going to miss all of you, I'm going to miss serving with you, but doing so has been the great honor of my life.

"Those who might have been looking forward to seeing me get choked up and shed a few tears, sorry to disappoint you. That's for the far future. For now, we've all got a job to do. And to that end, I want to introduce you all to the man you'll be working for during the next five years or so - James T. Kirk, the man, the myth, the legend waiting to happen."

Pike stepped aside with a formal smile. Kirk stepped forward, legipad in hand, standing between Pike and Spock and looking like he was about to take his father's precious antique Corvette for a joy ride.

"I can only hope to live up to your already existing legend, Captain Pike," Kirk said dryly. He held up the legipad, raised his voice, and recited: "From Chief of Starfleet Personnel to Captain James T. Kirk, executive officer United Star Ship *Merrimack* outgoing. In accordance with Starfleet Order One-oh-four, Section A, you will report to the commanding officer, United Star Ship *Enterprise*, for duty as his relief. Order effective at thirteen hundred hours, Stardate Twelve-twenty-seven point one. Signed, Rear Admiral Mindzalindz Val Zilya, Deputy Chief of Starfleet Personnel."

Kirk put the legipad under his arm as he and Pike faced each other. "I relieve you, sir."

"I stand relieved," Pike answered, holding out his hand to shake Kirk's. "And I congratulate you and wish you the best of fortunes to come."

And with that, James T. Kirk was captain of the *Enterprise*.

"All ship's standing orders will remain in force until further notice," he addressed the crew. "All personnel will submit condition reports to their division officers by fifteen hundred hours. Engineering department will prepare a refit priority list and tentative schedule by eighteen hundred. Ship's company, dismissed."

As the crew broke up and scattered to their duties, Kirk and Pike strolled easily down the middle of the hangar deck toward the shuttlecraft that had conveyed Kirk to the *Enterprise*. Spock walked beside Pike and Mitchell beside Kirk, as the two captains carried on much of the conversation.

"Have to say I was a little surprised when you showed up, Jim," Pike said. "Word on the street was Matt Decker was taking over."

"He was, but there's been a death in his family and he's on extended leave," Kirk said. "Considering the shortage of qualified starship commanders, he's fortunate they gave him any leave at all."

"Trust me, you're the fortunate one," Pike smiled. "I wish I could say *how* fortunate, but most of my senior officers are transferring to other duty. Some for similar reasons."

"May as well make yourself at home, then, Jim," Mitchell said. "I know several people who would jump at the chance to serve in engineering and life sciences."

"As do I, so long as they're eligible to take transfers," Kirk said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Mr. Spock, but aren't you the only senior officer who's staying aboard?"

"I believe you will find that the ship's head nurse, Christine Chapel, is remaining," Spock answered. "And Nyota Uhura has been promoted to full lieutenant and will be assuming duty as head of communications."

Pike cocked his head dolefully as the four men drew up alongside the shuttlecraft. "Ah, that's a shame I won't get to see more of her. She did a hell of a job during this past mission. But if Christine's staying on, I can only hope you enjoy the insight into the human heart you're going to be getting."

"I do not understand your inference, Captain." Spock frowned critically at Pike. "Nurse Chapel must surely realize by now that I have no capacity to reciprocate her affections."

"When you wish upon a star," Pike said with an amused look. He turned to Kirk and took a deep breath. "Request permission to leave the ship, sir."

"Granted," Kirk nodded. "Be well, Chris."

"Thanks. Spock, take care of yourself. Stay in touch, huh?"

"Live long and prosper, Captain." Spock raised his hand in the Vulcan salute. Pike patted his arm and forced half a smile. By now, he knew as well as Spock did that he had neither long life nor prosperity to look forward to.

He turned away and sighed apprehensively as he climbed into the shuttlecraft. Four steps up through the hatch: one step closer to meeting the fate he'd foreseen for himself on Boreth.

Spock glanced at Kirk and Mitchell with a strange look after the hatch had closed. "Curious."

"What do you mean?" Mitchell queried.

"To cast one's emotional desires across many thousands of light-years to a solar mass that cannot possibly affect their consequences is...most illogical."

Mitchell grinned. "Better get used to it, Mr. Spock. You're going to find an infinite diversity of emotional desire among an infinite combination of humans over the next few years."

Spock raised his eyebrows in an apparent gesture of resignation. Kirk looked at Mitchell and smiled boyishly. "One of the many IDICs we'll all have to get used to in the future, Gary. Meanwhile, we'd better let Captain Pike be on his way."

Matt Decker looked out the window to see the air taxi on descent, settling itself to the ground at the side of the house. He sealed his satchel, stood his regulation duffel bag on end, and faced Will, who had been packing alongside him in preparation for return to duty.

"Well, whaddya think?" he asked.

"I think it's a hell of a time to be leaving Brandi here all by herself, right before the end-of-year festivals," Will remarked.

Decker looked out the window and nodded. "No nonsense. She'll be all right. I've got some refitting to do in orbit, so I'll get back here whenever I can until Aunt Holly gets settled in."

"Whoever heard of one of the children of a house experiencing empty nest syndrome instead of a parent." Will's comment was as glib as it was rhetorical. "I'm just grateful Aunt Holly is willing to give Brandi a hand around here."

"You want to know something, Will? If it wasn't for your mother, I never would have learned the right way to raise a family like ours. And that was thanks to the family *she* came from." Decker picked up a legpad from the sideboard. "Is this mine, or yours?"

"Oh, that one's mine," Will said, glancing quickly at the address line.

Decker gave it a cursory glance as he handed it over. "Delta Four, huh?"

"Yeah. The Deltans have this nifty spherical cosmocompass they use for navigation, they read it in seven hundred and twenty degrees. It's nothing like our diaxial system, so I'm going there to help design a computer system that'll allow their navigation system to interface with Federation databanks."

"You're a regular Steve Jobs, my boy," Decker smiled.

"Well, I'm no Willis A. Lee, and that's a fact."

"Neither am I, for that matter. Hell, the only reason I'm retaining starship command instead of going to a division desk is there aren't enough qualified captains to go around."

"Would have been quite the feather in your cap if you got the *Enterprise* after all, though, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, don't worry about that, I'll make out fine with the *Constellation*. Might even get a chance to drop by Delta Four for a visit....if you can stand being seen with your old man."

Will laughed a laugh that felt awfully damn good after the sorrow and mourning of the past couple of months. They'd needed every minute of that period to process Maria's death, cope with their grief, execute her will and arrange for Brandi to have some company and help maintaining the homestead.

They came downstairs to find Brandi in the lounge packing up a couple of food tins. "I fixed you a little something for the ride," she told them. "Mother told me once how little repast you get on a starship that isn't a synthetic chicken recipe. So here's some good old-fashioned Wisconsin cheese and crackers." She paused with a knowing gleam in her eye - there was another shoe yet to be dropped. "And beefsteak," she added, smiling.

"Oh, my dear, you always do know what I like," Decker complimented her. "Is Aunt Holly here yet?"

"She's on her way. She's bringing Greg and Alison, too."

"Tell her to subspace me if she needs anything. And that goes for you, too, Brandi, you hear?"

"Don't worry, Dad. I'll be okay. I'll keep the place warm."

Decker stepped forward and spread his arms with a sigh. "Guess it's time to get going, then. I'll beam down to see you whenever I can get away until the refit's finished."

"Love you, Dad." Brandi's voice was thick as she hugged him and kissed his cheek. "Be safe out there."

"Love you, too, kiddo." Decker stepped back to let Will move in.

"So long, baby sister," Will said, hugging Brandi warmly. "Keep in touch, huh?"

"You, too," Brandi returned. "And take care of yourself." She released Will and leaned against the large easy chair, staring mournfully after the Decker men until they vanished from view of the doorway.

Extended family or no, Brandi couldn't quit the feeling that she might have seen both of them for the last time, that for the first time in her life she was totally, truly alone.

This time the air taxi took them to Weston, where they embarked on a three-leg highrail journey to St. Paul, then Portland, then back down to good old San Francisco. From the personnel office they collected their newly cut orders, and at Decker's suggestion, hung around the botanical gardens until nightfall. The gardens were the premium spot on the Starfleet HQ campus to gaze into the night sky and observe orbiting ships, spacedocks, satellites, and other platforms. Of the two of them, Decker would be leaving Earth's surface first, and it gave him a feeling of anticipatory thrill to speculate which of those spacedocks had just accepted his ship. For that matter he wondered if he might even rub nacelles with the *Merrimack* while getting ready for the mission to come.

The next day, bedecked in his dress uniform, adorned for the first time with his commodore insignia, Decker exited the flag officers' quarters to find none other than Andrew Carlington awaiting him in the foyer. Carlington, a short, slender man with handsome eyes and a starkly stratified haircut, had been Decker's yeoman ever since his stint at Starfleet Tactical and now bore the legpad containing his command orders. Greeting him with a handshake, Decker glanced around.

"Something missing, sir?" Carlington asked.

"Some *one*. I was hoping to - oh, here he comes." Decker motioned at Will, who was ambling toward them from the bachelor officers' quarters. "Why don't you go on ahead to the shuttlecraft, Andy. I have a little more father-and-son business to attend to."

"Yes, sir." Carlington crossed the foyer and exited to the shuttlecraft launch pad as Will approached his father with a wistful smile.

"Going to be hard learning all over again to think of you as my superior officer after these last couple of months," he said matter-of-factly.

"Just don't forget at the end of the mission, I'm still your old man." Decker patted him on the arm and led him on a slow walk toward the launch pad, where a Type F shuttlecraft waited a safe distance from the building. "In fact, the next time you and Brandi and I all get together again, I hear there's a newly discovered planet in the Munrovia cluster called Bacchus Five. From what I know, it's a happening place for a wintertime getaway."

"What, like a ski trip?"

"Or maybe an ice hockey tournament. Hey, maybe you'll have made lieutenant by then."

"You might even have made admiral, as far as that goes."

Decker chortled. "Have to live through this one first. See if I can't find at least one planet your mother would have wanted to retire to." He sighed deeply and gazed up into the sky, puffed with small white clouds. "When do you ship out?"

"Tuesday," Will said. "The *San Jacinto* will be taking me and the rest of the computer science team out to the Deltan system. Any chance you'll be passing through?"

"Couldn't tell you, not till I get my mission orders, and I won't receive those till we put to space."

"Then once again we say goodbye," Will said with a sad smile.

"Come on, now." Decker patted him on the arm. "We can make it for five years, son. It's been about that long since you entered the Academy, hasn't it?"

"Well, yes, sir." Will shrugged. "But it's just....this'll be the furthest I've ever been away from home, and I know what you said, but I'll still be

worried about Brandi."

"I know. That makes two of us. But I'll make time to get home and be with her while the *Constellation's* in refit. and you'll have plenty to keep you busy on Delta Four. And you be careful around those Deltan women, you hear me? They may be hairless, but I've heard they can get awfully hairy just the same."

It was enough to elicit a laugh from Will - a short, chortling laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. He nodded, smiled wistfully, and held out his hand. "Listen, Dad, don't forget to look after yourself, okay?"

"Sure, Will, I sure will." Decker clasped his son's hand in both of his own and then pulled him into an embrace. "So long, son. I'll see you out there."

"Goodbye, Dad."

It seemed an interminable minute before Decker could step back and look away from that downcast face. He patted Will on the shoulder, turned away, and headed towards the shuttlecraft. He glanced only in the briefest at Yeoman Carlington and the shuttle's pilot before he looked back at Will and raised a hand in a last farewell.

He saw Will's chin tilt upward and his lips purse with emotion only a second before the doors to the shuttle closed. He sighed, scratched the back of his head, and headed for the copilot's seat on the starboard side.

"All right, Lieutenant, take us away," he said as he sat down. The pilot, a small-framed young woman with short, closely-cropped black hair, briefly acknowledged and thrust the shuttlecraft skyward.

"This is my favorite part," she remarked as the shuttlecraft exited the outer boundary layer. "Seeing one of these ships from outside and knowing what it's like to be able to handle something that big."

"You've helmed starships before?"

"Yes, sir, I sure have. Only reason I'm shuttling right now is...." The pilot looked away and bowed her head. "There was a death in my family here on Earth, and I've taken a temporary ground assignment. Just so we can all help get each other through it."

"Sure would be nice," Decker murmured.

"Sir?"

"I lost a family member recently myself. Definitely helps to have all hands on deck to help you cope with it. Of course the trouble with being a command-grade officer is they don't give you much time to take care of family business, especially not when there's a shortage of qualified starship captains and ships in need of a command structure."

"I have a feeling you and I could talk about this stuff for hours, Commodore," the pilot said with a humorous expression that was more of a smirk than a smile.

"How do you figure on that, Lieutenant....er...." Decker gestured, seeking for her to identify herself.

"Ortegas, sir. Erica Ortegas. I was chief navigation officer on the *Enterprise* for her last mission, under Captain Pike." Her expression turned from humorous to knowing.

"Ah, I see," Decker nodded consideringly. "Then you're aware of why there's a shortage of qualified captains."

"Painfully aware, sir." Pensively, Ortegas looked over the navigation display and adjusted the shuttle's heading toward the spacedock. "Sometimes I wonder if...."

"If?"

If Captain Pike will find some way to escape what's coming to him was what Ortegas had intended to say, but she and the rest of the *Enterprise's* command crew were sworn to secrecy on that subject. She glanced briefly at him and substituted: "If outer space really does want us all dead."

"It comes to us all eventually. Doesn't matter if it's outer space or some planetside accident or some extraterrestrial disease."

Ortegas's face turned suddenly serious. She looked like she was about to say something, but then she clammed up before shrugging her shoulders. "Well....in that case, I say we enjoy this while we got it." She reached forward, pushed a switch, and opened the viewing ports in front of the pilot seats.

The starship that awaited them in the spacedock was a vision, its hull burnished with faded silver, its running lights freshly cleaned and clear as Caribbean water, and its deflector dish and Bussard collectors removed for cleaning and refinement. Ortegas thrust the shuttle upward to allow Decker a view of the ship's tops. Its bridge dome was transparent, and it didn't seem to have so much as one hull plate out of alignment. Decker sat up straight for a better view and permitted himself an approving smile. The identification markings forward of the bridge, U.S.S. CONSTELLATION NCC-1017, were still perfectly legible despite the fade of the finish.

"She's a beauty, Commodore," Carlington remarked from his vantage point behind Decker's seat.

"You think she's a beauty now, Andy, just you wait till we're through with the refit."

"What's up with the registry number, though? Awfully low for a *Constitution* class, isn't it?"

Ortegas's droll smirk reappeared. "Maybe she's really just the *Enterprise* dressed up for Halloween," she offered.

Decker looked at her and chuckled. "They tell me she was originally an *Achernar* class, they were numbered in the one-thousand series. But she was damn near blown apart during the Battle of Antares Prime and they ended up rebuilding her to *Constitution* specs."

"Antares Prime, huh?" Carlington repeated. "She's lucky she made it out of that one."

"Weren't we all," Ortegas said.

"Mutual feeling, Lieutenant?" Decker surmised.

Ortegas nodded as she laid the shuttlecraft into a circular pattern around the *Constellation's* bridge. "Yes, sir. I was at the helm on the *Hawking*. The Klingons knocked out our main deflector and we were ordered to withdraw and switch position with the ship aft of us. So in they went with phasers blazing, but it wasn't five seconds before the Klingons shoved a torpedo right up their astrocompass." She paused and began to widen her orbit around the *Constellation's* saucer section. "Sometimes I can't quit thinking, it could have been us. *Should* have been us. There, but for the grace of Starfleet Command, go I."

"And is it also by the grace of Starfleet Command that you're now circumnavigating my ship's primary hull like some kind of Buck Rogers wannabe?" Decker inquired.

"Oh, hell, no, Commodore," Ortegas laughed. "Just giving you the grand exterior tour of your new command." She flew the shuttlecraft at an alarming velocity around the rim of the saucer section as the intercom whistled.

"*Constellation* to Shuttlecraft HQ-One," an urgent, emphatic voice blared from the speaker. "Lieutenant Ortegas, you are cleared for *immediate* landing in main shuttle bay!"

"Shuttlecraft HQ-One, copy that," Ortegas answered. "Should take about a minute or so for those hangar doors to open all the way. In the meantime, fasten your seat belts, my men!"

"Fasten our *what*?" Carlington was baffled.

"Sit down, shut up, and hold on, Andy!" Decker exhorted. It told him something that whoever had transmitted from the *Constellation* knew Ortegas by name and reputation alike. And sure enough, she increased the shuttlecraft's velocity by another fifty kilometers per hour as she completed her dash around the saucer section.

Thrusting upward, she zoomed along the top of the port warp nacelle, executed a sharp U-turn at the aft end and shot back forward along the top of the starboard nacelle. Upon reaching the nacelle's support pylon, she pushed the shuttlecraft over into a sharply angled dive ten meters above the pylon, straight at the *Constellation's* engineering section. Carlington made an unintelligible sound of consternation - it was here that he fully took in the import of Decker's warning when Ortegas suddenly jolted the shuttlecraft's nose upward and raced up the pylon of the port nacelle.

"Lieutenant, you *are* of course familiar with Regulation Fifty-five, paragraph nine," Decker said loudly.

"Of course, Commodore," Ortegas replied. "Don't worry, I'm not gonna collide with anything. Just sit back and enjoy the ride!" She gleefully hove starboard, zoomed toward the saucer section again and went into another breakneck loop around the ventral sensor array and phaser emitters. That move completed, she pushed the shuttlecraft into another quick dive of 45 degrees along the connecting dorsal and swooped in close above the engineering section. Suddenly Decker was ironically grateful he hadn't gotten command of the *Enterprise* - having this wild woman for a senior navigation officer would not have been good for his digestion.

"All right, Ms. Ortegas, that's enough!" he forced himself not to shout. "You're not flying a starship! Now get me on board before you break something!"

"I checked the inertial dampers myself this morning, sir," Ortegas said breezily. "Nothing to fuss about." Flying out aft of the engineering section, she slowed the shuttlecraft drastically and spun it 180 degrees on its vertical axis, to a view of the *Constellation's* hangar with its wide-open doors and its flashing landing lights. She thrust ahead one last time at a speed better suited to breaking a close orbit than docking a shuttlecraft.

"And...*kaboom!*" Ortegas exulted as she hit the braking thrusters and brought the shuttlecraft to a dead halt. Then, with a gentleness Decker no longer thought her capable of, she lowered the small vessel onto the revolving landing pad, shut down the engines, and signaled for the deck crew to secure the hangar.

"Thank you for flying with Ortegas Starship Tours," she said in mock formality. "Please watch your step as you exit the spacecraft and enjoy the rest of your day."

"You know, Ms. Ortegas, before my wife died, one of the last things she noticed was all the gray hair I got out of Starfleet," Decker said acidly. "Well, let me tell you, she hadn't seen nothin' yet."

Ortegas's flamboyant grin faded, and she looked away. Her little flyby of the *Constellation* suddenly didn't seem quite as exhilarating alongside her profound sympathy for the recently widowed commodore. She turned up the gain on the comm system in time to hear the transmission from the operator's level: "Hangar doors secured. Hangar deck pressurizing. All hands, stand by for entry."

"Good luck on your new command, Commodore," Ortegas said quietly.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Decker said simply. He arose and moved aft to the hatch, which opened at almost the same time as the airlock to the main corridor. In filed the crew, two people at a time, forming ranks to either side of the hangar deck's centerline. Midgrade officers were first

in, followed by crewmen and technicians. More midgrade officers and finally senior officers filtered out onto the observation deck ringing the hangar, with eight of them forming a clutch at the forward bulkhead.

With all hands present and accounted for, Decker looked down at the airlock again as three more men passed through it. He recognized Ray Brienzio as much from his build as his swaying, loping gait. The second person was evidently his yeoman, but the third, a tall, square-jawed commander in a gleaming gold dress tunic, Decker was sure he'd never seen.

Decker and Carlington descended from the shuttlecraft's hatch to the hangar deck, where Brienzio stepped forward to extend a greeting hand. "Welcome back, Matt," he said, in a low, man-to-man tone.

"You start that 'welcome-Matt' shit with me again and that nose of yours is gonna need a refit next," Decker told him with a mock warning look.

Brienzio chuckled, but his face summarily turned somber. "Hey, I heard about Maria. I'm sorry for all of you."

"Thanks, Ray," Decker nodded. "Best thing for me to do now is get back up and get out there for her."

"Did you enjoy your little thrill ride with Ortegas?" Brienzio asked, tossing a wry glance toward the shuttlecraft.

"Now what ever gave you that idea?" Decker chortled.

"Lucky guess," Brienzio said. He moved aside and allowed the youthful-looking commander to step forward, also offering his hand for a shake.

"Commander Richard Edgerton, sir. I'll be your first officer." The wiry, well-structured man had a hefty British accent and a dimpled smile. "Welcome aboard."

"Ah, pleased to meet you, Mr. Edgerton," Decker smiled. "This your first tour on a starship?"

"As first officer, yes, sir. But I've been with *Constellation* for one five-year assignment as tactical officer. Captain Hamel was rather pleased to learn you'd be taking over for him."

"Well, in that case, shall we?" Decker motioned down the clear aisle the crew had formed in the middle of the hangar. Nodding, Edgerton led the procession forward, Brienzio and Decker following him walking abreast, and their yeomen bringing up the rear. Men and women in dress uniforms of all colors packed both the hangar and observation decks now, all their attention drawn to the five men walking toward the airlock.

They rode a small lift up to the observation deck, where Edgerton moved over to stand with the group of senior officers. Two of them Decker recognized from the staff of Starship Division 2, the rest he was sure he would come to know in the months ahead. Brienzio, meanwhile, moved up to the railing overlooking the hangar deck.

"Attention, all hands," his voice boomed out over the assembly. "Commodore Matthew Decker is taking over today as your new commanding officer. Most of you know him by reputation - he earned his promotion in action against a hostile race. He is not afraid of a fight, and he is not afraid of the unknown. Those of you who are new on board can place your full confidence in your commanding officer, that these will be five memorable years of exploration to come. Those of you who have been aboard ship for a while, it's business as usual. Peaceful exploration and defense of Federation territory, but with Commodore Decker on the bridge, a lot of coming, seeing, and kicking ass!"

He paused for the laughter that rang about the hangar. Then he stepped back a pace, turned, and nodded his head. "Commodore Decker, you will now read your orders to your command."

"Yes, sir." As he took his legipad from Carlington and stepped up to the railing, Decker shot a short glance out one of the viewports of the observation deck. He could see at least three dozen stars just in that one tiny field of vision. Remembering all those ancient myths of departed souls watching from amongst those stars, he wondered which one of them represented Maria looking down on him from above. Then he suddenly remembered the line from the poem Will had read at Maria's grave: *I am the soft stars that shine at night.*

He took a deep breath, straightened up, and faced the assembled crew.

"From Chief of Starfleet Personnel to Commodore Matthew R. Decker, detached commanding officer U.S.S. *Merrimack*, NCC-1344," he read loudly and clearly from the legipad. "In accordance with Starfleet Order One-oh-four, Section A, you will report to U.S.S. *Constellation*, NCC-1017, to assume the duties of that ship's commanding officer. Order effective at eleven hundred hours, Stardate One-two-four-zero point six. Authorized signature, Vice Admiral Antonito Galindez, Chief of Starfleet Personnel."

He handed the legipad back to Carlington and faced Brienzio. "I, Matthew R. Decker, have received and acknowledged my orders to assume command of U.S.S. *Constellation*, and will carry out all duties and responsibilities of that position to the best of my ability."

"The Federation has every confidence that you and all of your crew will do the same," Brienzio answered, putting forth his hand. "She's all yours, Matt. Congratulations."

"Thank you, sir." Decker kept a straight face as he shook hands with the senior commodore: the crew was now his crew as he turned back to face them. "All ship's standing orders will remain in force until further notice," he continued. "Commander Edgerton, I will meet all department heads in Briefing Room One at eleven thirty. Dismiss the crew from quarters."

"Very good, sir." Edgerton stepped up beside him and elevated his voice to be heard throughout the hangar. "All department heads, kindly make yourselves available at eleven thirty hours in Briefing Room One. Crew dismissed!"

Chapter 7

With the *Constellation* having a bit more meat on its bones than the *Merrimack*, Brienzio walked Decker up to the captain's quarters, pointing out the ship's vital systems as they went. "I hear Jim Kirk got the *Enterprise* while I was away," Decker said conversationally as they stepped off the turbolift.

"Yeah, just in time for her overhaul," Brienzio said dryly. "So he'll be busy overseeing that for a few months, then post-overhaul trials, *then* working up a crew that's about ninety-eight percent green before he takes her out for a fiver."

"You know, after you first said you were going to try and get me on that ship, he told me he was jealous. And if I'm going to be totally honest, Ray....the feeling's kind of mutual."

"Ah, well, there's no rescinding the orders now that you've both read 'em."

"Well, if I didn't have my reasons why I wasn't available, I might even be inclined to fight it."

"It was out of my hands, Matt. Damned if I know who you'd have to fight."

"I'd just hate to think some desk spacer on the top floor felt that I had to prove myself all over again, that I'm still fit for starship command after losing my wife."

"Pike would've kept the *Enterprise* if they weren't sending him up to a training command, so the *Constellation* here might've ended up going to you anyway. Hell, if things didn't shake out like they did, Jim might have gotten her instead. At least she didn't run into any trouble out on the Klingon border, so you'll be ready to fly a lot sooner."

"And head where, the Neutral Zone?"

"What, along Romulan space? Beats hell out of me, but I have a hunch you're going a tad deeper than that." Brienzio drew up in front of a door whose name plating designated the deck and section numbers and simply read, "COMMANDING OFFICER." The plate bearing the name of the *Constellation's* former captain had already been removed.

"All right, this is where I'll be steppin' off," he said. "I think Jerome left you a message in there, a 'same ship, different captains' kind of send-off."

"Decent," Decker said. "Well, then, Ray, I'll see you in a few years."

"Here's hoping," Brienzio said as they shook hands one more time. "So long, Matt. Take care of your ship, your crew and yourself, willya?"

"You bet I will." Decker clapped Brienzio on the arm. Then his old shipmate turned away and ambled back the way he'd come.

Inevitably, Decker drew a comparison to his erstwhile lodgings on the *Merrimack* as soon as he entered the captain's quarters. These quarters were somewhat more spacious, with a separate compartment for sleeping and personal hygiene. Viewing ports high on the bulkhead were made of reinforced, galvanized transparent aluminum and afforded a view directly ahead of the ship. In the main compartment, a small galley with a dining table nestled against the inner bulkhead, and against the outer bulkhead, a leisure space with a work desk, a reading chair, and some shelves. Of course there would be a little time during the next couple of months to visit Brandi, bring back some of his personal effects from each visit, and decorate the space to his liking. He moved over to the work desk and picked up the legipad resting beside the monitor screen.

Dear Matt,

I suppose I should shed a tear to be leaving the Constellation after almost a decade's travel, but how does the saying go? "There's no place like home." When a man has seen his share of exploration and action, no one will take issue with his need for a little rest. I've had an Earthside assignment to look forward to for some years now, and thus I bequeath you a grand adventure in a starship as solid and powerful as Federation engineers can dream of. Believe me when I tell you that you can trust your life to your senior officers as implicitly as they trust theirs to you. I sincerely congratulate you on your promotion, your assignment, and your fortune to command the worthiest vessel ever to fly among the stars she was named for.

Yours,

Capt. Jerome Hamel

Decker nodded to himself and reread the message once. He didn't know Jerome Hamel that well, but if he was any kind of starship captain, it wouldn't even be two years before he would be requesting transfer to another deep-space command. Decker glanced about the bulkheads again and wondered about Jim Kirk, and what distant new stellar horizons would be waiting for him and the *Enterprise* when they next broke out of the solar system. What was it he'd told Kirk about that ship during their promotion celebration....that it always seemed to get a hard case for a captain? Well, Kirk certainly fit the bill. Damn that Veloran redstalk, damn it to botanical hell. But then again, was it as much the loss of Maria that had affected this development as perhaps some desk spacer who thought Decker wasn't a hard enough case for a ship like the *Enterprise*?

Maybe he should find out and try to fight it after all.

There were too many other people for him to wonder about, from Kirk to Will to Brandi and her cousins, to the officers waiting for him in the briefing room down the corridor. He turned away from the reflective surface in his mind and took up the short yet authoritative march from his quarters to the briefing room, entering to find everyone who had been standing behind him when he read his command orders, with the exception of Brienzio and the division staff officers.

"Attention on deck!" The piercing shout came from a tall, trim-figured woman, ranked as a lieutenant commander, standing next to the door.

Every foot turned, every posture stiffened and every eye came to bear on the door and the man who had just stepped through it. Decker looked all of them over: most of them were human, with the exception of one Andorian in a gold command uniform, a Vacotian in the red dress of engineering, and a Bolian in a tunic that matched his complexion almost to the shade. Edgerton stood in the center of the room: apparently he'd just been in deep conference with two others of the command staff.

"As you were," Decker nodded. With a questioning look and an outstretched hand, he turned to the woman who had called attention.

"Seppala, sir," she said. "Chief of security."

Decker nodded again as he shook her hand and then moved to the next man who approached him, a blue-tunicked lieutenant commander with an Asian countenance. "Masada, sir. Chief science officer."

The Vacotian, short, stocky, green-skinned and bristly-haired, came next. "Veltanoa, sir. Chief engineer."

"Dorian, sir. Communications." This from a stoutly built human with a thick thatch of black hair.

"Samuels, sir. Navigation." The smiling young lieutenant seemed fresh and eager - but only time would tell if he would be able to fill Pete Brent's chair behind that helm.

"Jol, sir. Chief medical officer." The tall Bolian's voice was gravelly and soft, his handshake gentle.

"Molinos, sir. Personnel." The dark-eyed woman had a deep Filipino accent.

"Zhour, sir. Weapons and tactical." The short, wiry Andorian didn't exactly fit Decker's ideal image of an efficient weapons officer, but there were few other races better suited to his posting.

The last officer, a small, blonde woman wearing no braid on her sleeves, seemed momentarily to avoid eye contact as she spoke in a soft, timid tone. "Galbraith, sir. Supply and logistics."

"Well, let's all have a seat." Decker gestured at the table and sat at the angled captain's position beside the science panel as the rest of his officers took seats of their own. "A pleasure to make the acquaintance of all of you," he addressed them, picking up a pair of computer disks from the science station. "And I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm looking forward to getting away from Starfleet bureaucracy for the next five years."

A few guarded laughs darted quickly about the table. "Before we begin, Commodore," Edgerton said, "on behalf of all of us, I should like to express our condolences on your wife's passing, sir. When we learnt you were taking over for Captain Hamel, the news got round rather quickly."

Decker lowered his eyes and nodded, fingering the computer disks he'd picked up. "Thank you, Commander. Death is nobody's favorite business, but we can live in hope it's the last time any of us has to deal with it for a while. As such, I'd like to be brought up to speed on the overall health of the ship's personnel before we put to space. No sense in bringing along a crew member who's susceptible to disease."

"I'll allow Dr. Jol to speak to that one, sir." Edgerton gestured at Dr. Jol, who wore the rank of a lieutenant commander on his cuffs along with a pleasant, demure smile.

"Welcome to the *Constellation*, sir." Jol slowly bowed his head. "I believe you'll find the crew is in excellent health, to a man. Also, while you were on leave, your former CMO, Dr. Suslowicz, pulled some of his newfound weight at Starfleet Medical. At his behest, the *Constellation* is to be a test bed for a shipwide life function monitor, called Starlife. Once it's linked with the internal sensors, it should enable us to get a feel for the general health and wellness of the crew on both physical and psychological levels during periods of varying stress and new experience."

"Well, I've always wanted to be a guinea pig," Decker said dryly. "Commander Veltanoa, status of our propulsion plant?"

"We'll be having our impulse engines removed and replaced this time in," Veltanoa answered in his raspy Vacotian growl. "We will be receiving a new and improved sublight propulsion system. Per standard post-deployment protocol, warp drive has been defueled as the antimatter pods await replacement."

"Very well. Lieutenant Molinos, would you mind giving me a breakdown of new crew members, experienced people and those ready for rotation?"

Molinos pushed a legipad across the table toward Decker. "Here's a general rundown, sir," she said. "There are no more plate owners on board, they were all rotated to other duty some years ago. Aside from yourself, we have some fifty personnel who are new on board, twenty of whom have blank service records. The most experienced crew are assigned to engineering and life sciences, and some two hundred have been aboard for one or two deployments already."

"Good, I like having a competent ship's company." Decker briefly scanned the contents of the legipad. "All right, Miss Galbraith, going off this roster, we obviously have a more multiracial crew than most starships. I want you to assure that the food processors are able to satisfy everybody's culinary preferences. Also, get into a huddle with each of the other department heads and work out a priority list for parts and equipment."

Galbraith still didn't look at him, but she nodded wordlessly, her eyes darting hither and yon about the tabletop. "Beg your pardon, Ensign?" Decker prodded her.

"Yes - yes, sir," she stuttered briefly. "I'll see to it."

"Very well. And, ah, Ensign, be a little more responsive with me forthcoming, will you?"

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

Decker pushed the legipad away and surveyed the ten people sitting around the table briefly. "All right, ladies and gentlemen, that covers everything that comes foremost to mind. Unless any of you has a pressing concern you'd like to address, we may as well disperse and get ourselves to work."

"There is one thing, Commodore," Security Chief Seppala spoke up. "Commander Edgerton and I were both curious if you intend on leading landing parties yourself, or delegating them to the most qualified officer."

"I think we'll play that one by ear," Decker said without hesitation. "But let's get one thing straight, Commander - when it's a question of leadership among members of my crew, I *am* the most qualified officer. Whoever is in charge of a task unit on the *Constellation*, or on the ground for that matter, isn't beaming anywhere without my orders, is that clear?"

"Entirely clear, sir," Seppala nodded. Catching Decker's glance, Edgerton nodded assent.

"Very well. If there's nothing else, let's get to work. Dismissed."

Decker arose, joined in a second by the rest of his command staff. As they dispersed into the corridor, Dorian fell in beside Masada.

"Does the name Philip Francis Queeg mean anything to you?" he asked in a low voice.

"No," Masada said. "Does he even exist, or is he strictly literary?"

"I think we'll find out soon enough. At least this guy didn't appoint a morale officer cold-turkey right off of Julia's legipad."

"Somebody ought to enlighten him about Laurie Galbraith, though," Masada muttered. "Commodore Brienzio has an autistic niece, I don't think he'd appreciate the way Decker spoke to Laurie just now, even if they did serve together before."

"I run communications, I'll communicate it to him if I have to," Dorian said as they turned a corner and headed for the officers' lounge. "You just better hope Decker doesn't start causing us any graver threats than we're facing as it is."

"You don't think it's going to come to *that*, do you?" Masada gave him a sidelong, piqued look.

"Well, that's why Section Thirty-one planted the both of us here, isn't it?" Dorian dropped his voice to barely more than a whisper. "Threat assessment and response is our *raison-d'être*. But tell you what, Toshiro, with Decker in the big seat, I think we've got our work cut out for us."

Sitting in his quarters, Edgerton rubbed his prominent chin as he pored over the duty roster for the refit. Just as well to have experienced crew relieving brand-new members wherever possible and making sure everything had been done correctly. Although, that new sublight propulsion plant they were getting would require no shortage of new procedures and drilling for greenies and veterans alike: at least Veltanoa was equal to the challenge.

Presently, the door buzzer sounded. "Yes," Edgerton responded.

Decker passed through the sliding door and held up his hand to bid Edgerton to relax. "Take it easy, Mr. Edgerton. You got a minute?"

"Yes, sir, of course. What can I do for you?"

"Well, first of all, what's your pleasure? Richard? Richie? Rich the son of a bitch?"

Edgerton laughed good-naturedly, gratified that his new commanding officer was inclined to temper his curmudgeonly air with a gruff sense of humor. "Richard will do nicely, sir."

"Good, because if there's gonna be one son of a bitch on this ship, it's damn well gonna be me." Decker looked past Edgerton at the framed image resting on the shelf behind him, an image of Edgerton standing beside two pre-teenage girls. A fortyish woman with dark brown hair and a crinkly-eyed smile stood opposite him.

"Your family, I take it?" Decker said, nodding at the image.

"Yes, sir." With a proud smile, Edgerton turned briefly to touch the image. "My wife Shona, and my wonderful girls, Madeline and Catriona."

"It's a damn nice thing to have a family to come home to. I have a son stationed on Delta Four, and a daughter who's keeping things in order at home since their mother died. But whether she's up to it or not, that question's never going away. So don't lose touch with those ladies while we're out there, whatever you do."

"I dare not, sir."

"Wise man." Decker folded his arms and squarely faced Edgerton - it was time to get down to business. "Now, give me your evaluation of Ensign Galbraith."

"Is there some problem with her?" Edgerton said curiously.

"Nothing earth-shattering, but I'm still waiting for her to return an inventory of library computer disks. As a matter of fact, I've noticed it can be difficult to get through to her most of the time, like she's off in her own little world or something."

"I would say she simply needs a little time to get acclimated to the way you run things on this ship. She *is* autistic, after all. And as such, what she lacks in sociality, she more than makes up for in attention to detail."

"Meaning what, in practice?"

"Meaning whether it's computer disks or hand phasers or circuit connectors or what-have-you, Ms. Galbraith has an almost clairvoyant knack for recall. She was but a deck hand on our last cruise, but somehow she picked up on an irregularity in the dilithium reaction chamber when we were patrolling perilously close to the Klingon border. Would have badly prevented us from outrunning any Klingon forces had they jumped us, and thus it was that she earned a field promotion to ensign."

"Well, in that case I can imagine what Captain Hamel thought of her, but proving her worth to me is going to take some doing."

"I doubt she'll disappoint you, sir." Edgerton wore a dim smile. "Ever since then, Ms. Galbraith is almost never mistaken on her accounts of supplies and equipment. Frankly, my evaluation of her is that she's an incredibly efficient logistics officer, despite her occasional social lapse."

"I see," Decker nodded slowly. "Well, I appreciate your honesty. But I'm nobody's fool at picking up irregularities myself, and it's true they can really screw up a mission. If Ms. Galbraith hasn't acclimated to the way I want things done before we're ready to get underway, she'll have to acclimate to a whole new assignment."

"I understand, sir." Edgerton took a deep breath, preparing for his attempt to change the subject. "If you don't mind me asking, how went your checkup with Dr. Jol?"

"Nothing to worry about, I'm in commanding trim. He has a better bedside manner than one or two other ship's surgeons I've had."

"No doubt he told you he'd just finished his internship on Bolias before first contact, almost immediately after which he applied to Starfleet Medical. He's become a very well-known name there since then. Revered, in fact, what with the exponential increase in extraterrestrial graduates who studied with him. You'll find his knowledge of xenobiology almost as impressive as his humanoid expertise."

"He didn't have quite that much to say about his reputation. But I can't say as I've ever served with a Bolian before. We only contacted them what, ten or so years ago?"

"In twenty-two fifty-two, yes, sir. Still not many of them in Starfleet, though. I've known of only one who received a commission through the Academy, and she was the talk of the starship flotilla when her first deep-space assignment was to the *Enterprise*. But Dr. Jol has been with us for one exploratory mission, and so long as he has the medical staff he needs, I can confidently say he'll keep us all alive and kicking until we resume our present orbit."

"Hmm." Decker's gaze dropped. "I don't suppose he would have known what to do with a case of Veloran blood plague if he'd been in a different time and place."

"I...couldn't honestly say, sir," Edgerton said quietly, recognizing the reference Decker was making. "And I hope we don't have to find out by bringing a case of it on board."

"No, best we don't let that happen. Thank you, Mr. Edgerton. Carry on." Then Decker turned and exited the cabin.

Star Date: 1246.3

From: Chief of Starfleet Operations

To: Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Constellation (NCC-1017)

Via: Commander Starship Division 2

Subject: OPERATIONAL ORDERS & MISSION BRIEFING

When in all respects ready for deep space operation, U.S.S. Constellation will depart Spacedock no later than Stardate 1282 on an exploratory mission beginning in the Eridani sector. A resupply stop is scheduled at Starbase 9 where you will receive additional orders and updated briefing on political situations involving the Federation. Your exploratory course will include Sectors M-400; K-200; J-700; L-300; M-800; and N-100. A prearranged course has been uploaded into Constellation's navigational computer, subject to change in accordance with further operational orders and/or the Commanding Officer's judgment of developing conditions. Return to Starbase 9 for debriefing no later than Stardate 5963.

Numerous planets in the above listed sectors are believed to be inhabited. Per standard exploratory protocol, Constellation personnel will avoid contact with inhabitants until ascertaining their state of cultural development. No contact whatsoever shall be established with pre-industrial races. Cultural observers may, at the Commanding Officer's discretion, mingle with the members of an industrialized or space-capable civilization to determine their level of advancement. The Commanding Officer is reminded of the terms of the Prime Directive and is strictly ordered to adhere to it.

Upload the findings of your planetary surveys to the general Federation data bank as soon as practical. If previously unencountered alien races show signs of domestic or extraplanetary hostility, you will first attempt to establish contact. If an immediate response from Starfleet is unavailable, the Commanding Officer's discretion will govern.

Extraterrestrial races in Constellation's assigned vicinity that are considered hostile by Starfleet sociologists include the Klingons, Sieseksti, Nausicaans, Binesefians, Yupiaki, Kasiesiks, and Welakchulians. Each of these races is known to be expansionist and acquisitive. Additional orders received at Starbase 9 will outline areas where you are most likely to encounter one of them. The Klingons in particular continue to be warlike and are a race of extreme concern. Take whatever measures are necessary to avoid hostility. If a combat situation is unavoidable, notify the closest Starfleet Command base at once before taking defensive action. You are authorized to use any force necessary in defense of yourself or an innocent party.

Authorized Signature:
Adm. J. E. Komack, SFC-UFP
Chief of Starfleet Operations

Commodore's personal log, Stardate 1281.9. The past month has gone by quickly as we prepare the Constellation for the mission ahead. Removing the impulse engines, we were quick to discover, facilitated most of the work that needed to be done on the primary hull; and post-overhaul trials demonstrated that the new impulse engines are top of the line with 97.8% efficiency. Most notably, I've found that none of my senior officers have so far forced me to submit a poor fitness report for them. They each know what needs to be done, and when. During the past several weeks, I've come to understand that their efficiency rests on one pair of shoulders - and they aren't mine.

We will be ready to depart spacedock shortly, and as I count down these last few minutes in Earth orbit, I find that am not entirely ready. I never will be, not knowing what will become of my daughter Brandi now that she's at home by herself at such a young age. I told Will she would be all right, that she could take care of herself, but with both Will and myself returning to duty only a couple of months after losing Maria, no father is ever truly ready to leave his little girl on her own in the wild. The last time I visited her was by far the roughest, because post-refit trials were finished and we knew it was only a matter of days before the Constellation was ready to leave spacedock. By now Will has been on Delta IV during this same past month, and I feel Brandi is grossly fortunate to have Maria's extended family close by so she doesn't have to live in that house completely alone. She's only just grown to womanhood and now has to face a more uncertain future than she's ever had; leaving her to face it on her own is right up there with burying my wife for difficult stages of living.

Meanwhile, I am waiting. Not for any last-minute reports, not for any calls from the bridge, and I hope not for any surprise change of orders. I am waiting to meet one person on board to whom I need to speak about peak performance.

The door to Decker's quarters buzzed. He responded, the door slid aside, and Ensign Galbraith, looking nervous, took a hesitant half-step into the doorway. "You wanted to see me, Commodore?" her voice trembled slightly.

"That I did. What time is it, Ms. Galbraith?"

"It's, uh, sixteen fifty hours, universal coordinated time on Earth, sir."

"Good. Come with me." Decker exited his quarters and motioned for her to follow, keeping his pace slow to allow her to keep up with him as he moved down the corridor.

"Commodore...." she said, pausing to swallow. "If this is about the confusion in the storage bay on deck twenty-one...."

"Not exactly. We're ready to get underway, and I want all department heads on the bridge. I also want you to see something." They entered a turbolift, which Decker ordered to the bridge. "I was concerned at first about the time you were taking to submit some of your reports," he went on.

Galbraith inhaled sharply. "I'm - I'm sorry I haven't been more punctual, sir," she said earnestly. "I - "

"I'm not finished, Ensign. Dr. Jol took some time to enlighten me about your neurological condition. He's the first Bolian I've served with, and thanks to his education, you're the first neurodivergent human I'm aware of serving with. The mission hasn't even started yet, and I've already had these for new experiences."

"Do you intend to transfer me?" Galbraith asked timidly.

"If I did, we'd be headed for the transporter room instead of the bridge." The lift halted, the doors opened, and Decker marched onto the bridge to find all stations manned, Seppala and her deputy security chief standing to either side of the lift, and Edgerton sitting in the command chair.

"Commodore on the bridge!" Seppala announced. Without looking, Edgerton stood up, stepped to one side and nodded to Decker as he sat down. The bridge instruments hummed and bleeped in such harmonious rhythm as to be almost comforting: Galbraith took on a relaxed posture against the bulkhead between Seppala and Veltanoa.

"Well, Mr. Edgerton, you ready for space?" Decker asked.

"I am indeed, sir."

"Good. Systems report, engineering."

"All engineering spaces manned and ready," Veltanoa said. "Impulse and warp engines on the line. Maximum speed available, warp eight point five."

"Very well. Helm?"

"Helm ready, sir," Samuels said, turning in his seat. "Moorings engaged. Course plotted toward Alpha Centauri."

"Very well. Tactical?"

"Phaser banks charged and ready," Zhou answered. "All photon torpedoes on board, secured, and unarmed. Deflector shields available for defensive posture on command."

"Very well. Life sciences?"

"Sensors functioning, sir," Masada replied. "All computers operating, exoscience labs manned and ready. As I like to say, condition green."

Decker smiled briefly. "Very well. Medical?"

"Sick bay manned and ready," Dr. Jol said from his unobtrusive stance next to Masada. "Bio-labs prepared, Starlife system is active and indicates a high state of health and morale."

"Very well. Communications?"

"Communications ready," Dorian said, pressing one hand to his ear antenna. "All hailing frequencies active. Yard Command has cleared us for departure."

"Very well. All right, ladies and gentlemen - let's do it. Mr. Samuels, clear all moorings. All thrusters at station keeping."

"Aye, Commodore." Samuels made a rapid series of whirring, buzzing motions over his helm console, looked over his shoulder, and nodded. "All moorings cleared."

"One-quarter impulse power," Decker ordered.

With a flourish, Samuels pressed the appropriate switch. The deck vibrated, the new impulse engines rumbled, and the *Constellation* edged forward, creeping at first, then gathering momentum one kilometer per hour at a time. First the C frame of the spacedock disappeared at the edges of the main viewscreen, then the B frame, and finally the A frame. Earth was still partly visible on the port side. Decker held his gaze on that pristine cradle of nature as long as it hung in view, swore to himself that in memory of his beloved Maria, he would never let that or any other planet come to harm as long as he breathed.

Supply vessels and worker craft scurried out of the *Constellation's* path as it lumbered out of the spacedock. Samuels watched the screen with one eye and his navigation display with the other. He was confident, relaxed. Early in the refit, Decker had learned that Samuels had been flying since he was tall enough to pilot a hang glider. Well, as long as he didn't fly the *Constellation* the same way Erica Ortigas had flown that shuttlecraft.

"We are clear and free to navigate," Samuels announced.

"Very well," Decker said. "Show time. Ms. Marlowe, lay in your course for Alpha Centauri. Mr. Samuels, full impulse power."

"Full impulse power, aye, sir." Samuels punched several more switches as Lieutenant Marlowe bent over the astrocompass to adjust the ship's heading.

"Sure you wouldn't like to take a look back, sir?" Edgerton said quietly.

"No, it's time to look ahead," Decker answered. "There's a lot of galaxy out there that we've never seen, Richard. A lot of planets to discover and defend if need be." He settled back, slung his arm over the back of the chair and turned to see Galbraith still standing beside Seppala next to the turbolift.

"Come on down here, Laurie," he said, beckoning. Galbraith flitted down to the well of the bridge and stood beside him, looking inquisitive.

"This, Ms. Galbraith, is what I wanted you to see," he told her. "We're out of spacedock and underway exactly on schedule. No hang-ups, no unforeseen casualties, no annoying inconveniences. For me, that's another first."

"I'm glad, Commodore." Galbraith wasn't sure what else to say.

"You should be. I don't think anyone else recognizes it, but everyone on the senior staff has learned to depend on you to keep this machine of ours well-oiled. You saw to it everyone had their supplies and equipment when they needed them, and you kept everyone apprised of the opportune time slot to get their work done. And about that cargo bay thing, well - that was a minor hiccup all right, but you caught the yard workforce's error in the photon torpedo stowage in the meantime. If you hadn't raised an alarm about it, who knows what kind of domino effect could have resulted."

"I..." Galbraith seemed to be struggling with her words. "I'm obliged for your confidence, sir. Although I am somewhat at a loss to understand how I've incurred it."

"Richard, what was it you said about Ms. Galbraith's ability to recall?" Decker asked, turning to Edgerton.

"I believe the word I used was 'clairvoyant'," Edgerton smiled.

"And a damn good word it was." Decker looked approvingly back over at Galbraith. "You're a hell of a good officer, Ensign. In fact I'd say you're arguably the best logistics officer I've ever had. So now you can go on below and sort out that storage bay." He smiled and winked.

"Yes, sir," Galbraith said. "Thank you, Commodore." She smiled back, gratefully, and trotted back to the turbolift, where she received another encouraging look and a pat on the arm from Seppala as she passed from the bridge.

"Position report, Ms. Marlowe," Decker said.

"One half AU from Earth, sir," Marlowe answered. "Heading two seven zero mark eighteen."

"Go further west, young man," Decker nodded to Samuels. "Take us to warp two."

"Warp two, aye, sir." Samuels seemed ever eager to punch the propulsion controls. The stars flashed past the screen, faster and faster, as the familiar string-orchestra hum of the warp engines welled up from below. The *Constellation* shuddered, lunged quickly ahead: then it grabbed a firm hold on the space in front of it, stuffed it through the warp nacelles and spewed it out astern as it shot across the warp threshold with a

mighty whoosh.

In no time, Earth was hundreds of millions of miles distant.

Captain's log, U.S.S. Constellation, Stardate 1282.7. Commodore Matthew Decker recording. We have cleared Earth's solar system and are on course and on schedule for Alpha Centauri, where we will alter course toward Starbase 9 before beginning the next five years of our lives. Thanks to my senior command staff, all systems are functioning normally, all crew performing their duties to the peak of their ability. Note commendations on Lieutenant Commander Veltanoa and the engineering crew for their hard and diligent work refitting the ship's impulse engines and refining the warp drive; Lieutenant Stanley Dorian for maintaining constant lines of communication with Starfleet HQ and the shipyard workforce; and Ensign Lauren Galbraith for her efficient coordination of all departments and their activities. The possibility of a field promotion to lieutenant junior grade is in the offing if she proves to be as proficient while underway as she has in spacedock.

The Constellation herself seems to be running smoothly, although allowing for the fact that she and I have only just gotten acquainted, I get a sense that she feels a bit reluctant to be headed back out to deep space so soon. Far be it from me to anticipate what calamities we might encounter along our course, but it's almost as if the Constellation knows what lies ahead of us and is apprehensive about facing it. To my thinking, however, there is no cause for concern. A fine crew, good at their jobs and better at their judgment, are all I and this ship need to rely on. I expect we will reach Starbase 9 in four days free of incident, and set out on this mission free of worry.

In a remote corner of the galaxy, the star designated Dinius shone on the surface of its six planets, warmed the surface of the third for its lupinoid inhabitants. At least, to Earth science they would be considered lupinoid, looking like human-sized wolves but possessing a rudimentary sentience, better suited to their hunting habits than to interracial relations. They were the kind of race the Prime Directive would stipulate as "no contact" at their current level of advancement. Even if they eventually evolved into a limited-contact race, introducing them to the gray wolves of Earth would not suit their pack mentality at all.

Dinius III was Class L - extremely rocky, rugged, cold and windy, but its inhabitants had well evolved to those conditions. The mountains were their home and the caves their shelter. They had no need of fire: they subsisted on the raw meat and bodily fluids of the planet's smaller creatures, and hydrated from underground hot springs. Between the heated, effervescent liquid, the natural warmth of their food supply, and their own furry hides, they kept as warm as they needed to.

Thus, when the ground shook so hard as to splash one of the hot springs across the floor of its cave, the first instinct of the pack leader was to make a mad dash for the surface, two other pack members hot on his shanks. Angrily and aggressively, they pounded toward open air, ever ready to counterstrike against whomever was crashing their territory.

They reached the mouth of the cave just in time for a veritable rain of boulders and shale to come tumbling past it. The geological storm, strangely enough, had come from low ground to the east, not at all like an avalanche from further up the mountain. Looking up the slope, trying to identify the source, one of the pack members slapped his leader on the side and gestured into the sky.

All of them stood transfixed as they beheld a strange, dark splotch against the star. It looked like a pointy chunk of rock lying sideways. Then it changed shape, changed position. A blinding yellow shaft of light spurted from it and struck the mountains to the south this time. Gigantic chunks of minerals were blown loose, flew thousands of feet into the air, crashed indiscriminately into the surrounding landscape.

The hunters of Dinius III went fairly ballistic. Eyes flashing with fury, teeth bare with wrath, they snarled and roared and raged at the splotch on their sun, unidentifiable but clearly hostile to them, bent on destroying their land. The splotch changed shape again and spewed another beam of blinding yellow light. This time the ground all but disintegrated at their feet. The boulders flew, the mountains crumbled, and the Dinius lupinoids died, never knowing why, what had killed them or what chance they might have had of fighting back.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

With this chapter, we fast-forward a little over 3 years into the *Constellation's* journey under Matt Decker's command. Upcoming stories in the "Creatures in the Stars" series will follow the ship and crew during that period, and explore how they all formed working relationships bringing them (and us) to the following events.

Captain's log, Stardate 3200.2. For the second time in our conscious memory, war has broken out between the Federation and the Klingon Empire. As a Starfleet armada heads for Organia to meet the enemy in battle, the Constellation has diverted to the Scorpius cluster, in the disputed zone, to locate a neutral freighter that has gone missing in transit. The freighter is rumored to be carrying praxium, a partially collapsed metal element that can be refined into a high-tensile alloy for starship hulls. Such an alloy could provide a ship with a significant tactical advantage in combat. It goes without saying, we can't afford to let the Klingons get their mitts on it first.

"Yellow alert," Decker ordered. "Distance to nearest Klingon outpost?"

"About six AUs, sir," Marlowe answered. "But the interstellar medium here is dense enough that it should obscure our warp field."

"Unfortunately it's also playing havoc with our sensors," Masada called over his shoulder. "We're limited to a scan radius of only about two and a half AUs."

"That means we'll have to make close-range scans and hope to all our gods there aren't any Klingon attack cruisers lying in wait," Decker said grimly. "Mr. Zhou, I want defense fields activated around the bridge and main engineering. Load and arm photon torpedoes."

"Aye, aye, sir," Zhou acknowledged. "It is worth noting that Klingon sensors are more attuned to weapons targeting than to search and scan."

"Meaning by the time they've got us in their sights, we'll be easy pickings for them?"

"Well, call me an insufferable optimist, but it also means we should see them before they can see us."

"Okay, you're an insufferable optimist," Decker said, deadpan. "Toshiro, don't take your eyes off that viewer, you hear?"

"Yes, sir," Masada said.

The *Constellation* was well into its third year of exploring space that had only just been charted after it departed Earth. Some encounters had been more eventful than others - encounters such as a rebellious colony on Doradus whose governor was bent on secession, an interstellar entity whose gravimetric transients played havoc with celestial objects of all masses, and a race on Alrescha II that apparently had paid a clandestine visit to Earth not long before World War III. The Code 1 communiqué from Starfleet Command declaring a state of war with the Klingons was several days old, yet uncomfortably familiar to everyone who had been in Starfleet for the last one. All hands were showing the strain of a constant state of alert following three years of exploring the galaxy more or less in peace.

Edgerton came onto the bridge, stepped into the well, and stood beside Decker. "Twelve hundred hours, sir," he advised. "What news?"

Decker gave him the latest on the conditions of outer space and the complications caused to the sensor sweep. Then he briefed Edgerton on the *Constellation's* operational status, then concluded: "No sign of the Klingons yet."

"They must all be massing at Organia to take on our forces," Edgerton mused. "I wonder how things are shaping up over there."

"I wish we could concern ourselves, but we've got a job to do," Decker said resolutely. "I don't think this war will be over any time soon, but I'm in no hurry to lose it. The bridge is yours, Mr. Edgerton. See you at eighteen hundred."

"Very good, sir," Edgerton said as Decker put down his fingerprint-covered computer disks and stood up.

"And Mr. Masada," Decker added as he headed toward the turbolift. "You pick up anything resembling that freighter, I want to hear about it before you think about it."

"Understood, sir," Masada said. He and Dorian exchanged a look as Decker left the bridge, confident that the commodore suspected nothing of them, but a bit concerned about his intentions if the missing freighter should appear.

The hours wore on. As the *Constellation* meandered from search course to search course, one end of the cluster to the other, Edgerton had to relieve Marlowe from her post as fatigue began to overtake her - she was determined to hold the ship steady on the search pattern she'd laid out. It said something to Edgerton that the crew's dedication hadn't flagged a bit in the three years since Decker took command. The *Constellation's* mission was by now more than half over. As long as they made it through this confounded war, finished their mission in peace, maybe some leave on a resort planet before they resumed exploring the unknown....

Edgerton lingered on the bridge for a short while after Decker relieved him six hours later. Samuels was back at the helm, Masada getting ready for a relief soon, Dorian off watch below and a Vulcan junior lieutenant named T'Prea at communications. The *Constellation* was on a return leg of its search pattern and was about to change course to starboard when Masada chanced to rub his eyes before taking another look

into his viewer.

"Sir, I've got something!" he called out. "Bearing three two eight mark fifteen. Metallic mass, drifting southward away from Bakula Two-four-seven. Reads as a light vessel, mass of about three hundred kilotons. Could be our missing freighter."

"Alter course to approach, Danny," Decker said to Samuels. "Toshiro, give me a close-in scan. Any sign of unusual or unknown elements, don't miss 'em."

Edgerton leaned on the railing of the bridge well and rubbed his jaw as the *Constellation* dipped and yawed. Very soon the unidentified ship became evident on the viewscreen. It resembled nothing so much as a short caterpillar, with a bisectonal forward hull, a lengthwise column resembling a backbone beneath which its eight cargo containers were slung, and a tail section supporting its engines and single warp nacelle. From the perspective of the people on the *Constellation*, it was pointed directly downward from Bakula 247 toward the southern region of the galaxy.

As they drew closer, Decker looked up at Masada, still gazing into the blue glow from his sensor viewer. "I'm not detecting any traces of unusual elements, Commodore," the science officer said. "In fact, I'm not detecting anything at all. If that ship's carrying anything, it's well shielded."

"Can we beam aboard?" Decker asked.

"We can probably access the bridge and engineering spaces, but whoever goes over there better don an environmental suit first. Life support systems are inoperative, and atmospheric pressure reads zero."

"Sounds awfully bloody welcoming, doesn't it?" Edgerton commented.

"Awfully is right," Decker said. "I have a sinking feeling the Klingons got here before we did. You and Toshiro get your shit together and take a chemist over with you, along with Seppala and a couple of her people. We'll stand by here and make sure those stinkers don't return to the scene of the crime."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton said. Without another tarry he and Masada made tracks toward the turbolift.

"Slow to impulse," Decker ordered. "Bring us up alongside. Maintain a constant scan of the area. I'm *not* getting jumped by Klingons on an empty stomach."

"Not for nothing, sir, but...." Samuels's face contorted dubiously. "That ship doesn't *look* like it was attacked by Klingons."

"Never judge a Vulcan by his ears, Danny," Decker advised. Too late, he caught himself as he remembered who was currently manning communications. He half-turned, holding up a contrite hand. "No offense, T'Prea."

"Offense is a strictly human emotion, Commodore," T'Prea said calmly. "Although it *is* quite illogical to render judgment of an individual based on their auditory organs."

"I thought you might say something like that," Decker muttered under his breath. "Just keep your eyes open, Danny."

For a very few seconds, the only light on the freighter's bridge was the yellow sparkling energy as the transporter beam reached over from the *Constellation* and deposited Edgerton, Masada, Seppala, a chemical specialist and two security guards. All of them wore the environmental suits made from a blend of zirconium and polyvinyl chloride - which Seppala determined to be an uncompromising necessity once she'd taken some tricorder readings.

"You weren't fooling about the atmosphere, Mr. Masada," she said. "If we didn't have protection, we might as well have beamed into outer space."

"'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the ship, not a rodent alive to chew microchips," the chemist commented dryly.

"You missed your calling, Sanghevi," Masada said to the round-faced young woman. "You really should've been a high fantasy writer."

"What can I say, Mr. Masada?" Sanghevi shrugged. "I've got all the wrong brain chemicals for it."

"Well, let's get your brain chemicals trickling toward the cargo containers, shall we?" Edgerton said pointedly. "Ms. Seppala, if you please."

Holding her phaser carbine in front of her, Seppala led the cautious procession aft from the bridge. The first compartment they entered was a monitoring station, its instruments still active and its screens still lit. The screens showed the status of the cargo in each of the ship's containers, including their respective environments, but several items were glaringly missing from the displays.

"This is strange," Masada said, sidling over to one of the displays.

"What isn't strange anymore?" Seppala queried.

"There's no manifest. No data on the cargo. Each container shows as loaded, but....the environment reads exactly the same as the rest of this ship. I couldn't get any sensor readings from the *Constellation*, either."

"Could this have anything to do with life support being inoperative?" Edgerton asked.

"I don't see how. I think we'll need to take a closer look."

"There's nothing on those readouts about a destination, I take it," Seppala said as she resumed the sternward search.

"No such luck," Edgerton said. "This is a neutral freighter, Nevorian registry. If it's carrying a load of praxium, it could have been destined for either Federation or Klingon territory."

"You don't need special shielding to transport praxium, though," Sanghevi pointed out. "At the worst, it needs to be handled in zero G."

"Well, let's see what we can see." Masada moved to the hatch leading to the forwardmost container on the port side, examining the small display screen affixed to the front of it. "Oh, now that's interesting."

"Well, I'll be sure to note such in my log," Edgerton said. "*What is?*"

"The contents aren't in zero G, but they are in a stasis field. Whatever these containers are holding, without a stasis field, they'd be no containers at all."

"Is there any kind of chemical reaction going on in there?" Sanghevi asked. "Something the stasis field is preventing from getting out of control?"

"Let's have a look...." Masada tapped a scroll button to cycle through several displays until he found data that strongly resembled chemical makeup. He leaned close to it, frowning.

"Is that what I think it is?" he asked.

Hefting her tricorder, Sanghevi needed only a few seconds to take readings before she pulled back and stared at the hatch, her eyes wide with horror.

"Oh, my God!" she breathed, letting the tricorder fall to her side.

"I'll note him in my log, too," Edgerton said, somewhat impatiently. "What is it?"

"Sir...." Sanghevi gulped and looked at him. "We've got to find a way to either dispose of these containers or get them on board the *Constellation* before the Klingons arrive."

On the *Constellation*, the bridge was unnervingly quiet except for its instruments. Decker slouched sideways in his chair and fingered his computer disks, Samuels held the ship alongside the freighter, T'Prea worked with fluid, calculated movements across the communications console. It was Zhou, again manning tactical, who galvanized all of them.

"Unidentified vessels approaching off our starboard quarter," he announced. "Bearing one four five mark four eight. Can't identify them at this distance, but there's three of them that I can distinguish."

"McCreechie, sensors," Decker said to the junior science officer filling in for Masada at his station. "Stand by battle stations."

"Masada to *Constellation!*" Masada's voice over the speaker was uncharacteristically urgent.

"*Constellation* responding," T'Prea answered, her own voice striking a calm balance with Masada's perturbation.

"T'Prea, put Commodore Decker on, please," Masada said. "Sir, this is absolutely not what we thought we had here. The rumor was praxium, a rumor is just what it was. This ship is carrying two hundred and fifty kilotons of what reads as magnotritium nitrate - at least that's the closest approximation we can find!"

"Jesus H. Christ!" Decker muttered. "All right, Toshiro, let me have it with both emitters, willya?"

"Sir, if this stuff falls into Klingon hands, they could create weapons that would make the old hydrogen bombs look like water balloons," Masada said. "Somehow we've got to find a way to get rid of it before they get here."

It was here that Edgerton hit the communicator button on his own helmet. "Commodore, this is Edgerton. Based on our readings, I'm not sure we can safely dispose of this substance at all, not even with antimatter. Even hitting this ship with a photon torpedo from extreme range would likely as not shift several planetary orbits in this cluster!"

"Sir!" McCreechie stood bolt upright from the sensor viewer and turned around. "Those three ships are altering course to intercept, range eight hundred thousand kilometers and closing. Definitely Klingons!"

"Red alert!" Decker barked. "Richard, stand by to get back over here!"

"With all due respect, sir, we mustn't!" Edgerton protested. "If the Klingons get past the *Constellation* and take possession of this cargo, the damage they could do would tear the Federation to shreds! We can't let it fall into their filthy hands!"

"Well, in that case, we'll just have to -" Decker stopped short, distracted for a moment by the memory of what he'd told Will: *Never let them get past the Deckers*. He wasn't sure if he should tell Edgerton either that the *Constellation* would have to beat three-to-one odds, or that shifting half a dozen planetary orbits would prove to be the lesser of two evils. But in a flash he realized that he didn't have to be sure what to say.

He half-spun in his chair. "T'Prea, get Lieutenant Galbraith up here on the double," he said. "McCreechie, how long do we have before the Klingons are in range?"

"At best, eight minutes, sir," McCreddie answered.

"All right." Decker leaned over his comm speaker. "Richard, listen to me. Get a move on detaching those containers from the hull of the ship. Leave your comm link open and stand by for further orders. I'll know in a minute what we're gonna do with them."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton answered. He rushed across the freighter's central corridor and pawed at the bulkhead for the manual release of the container on the starboard side. "Masada, Sanghevi, you lop off number one. Dietz, you come over here with me. Seppala and Rechenko, take number four!"

As the red alert wailed, Dorian marched onto the bridge to relieve T'Prea; Decker half-turned to see Galbraith hurrying out of the turbolift behind him. "Yes, Commodore?" she asked anxiously.

"McCreddie, what's the exact total volume of those containers?" Decker asked.

"Ah....they top out at fifteen thousand cubic meters, sir," McCreddie said.

"Okay, Laurie, we're gonna be staring down some Klingon torpedo launchers here any minute," Decker said. "Where have we got space for those containers on board?"

"Maybe one of the ventral bays beneath main engineering - " Galbraith began, but Edgerton's hail cut her off.

"Two containers away, sir!" he reported. "We're on to the next pair!"

Galbraith hastened around behind Decker and bent over the speaker. "Mr. Edgerton, can we beam their contents into one of the storage bays?"

"Negative," Edgerton said. "They're extremely volatile. Probably not even safe to beam into space without blowing out the transporter."

"The shuttlecraft hangar, sir," Galbraith said without even inhaling. "That's the only adequate space we have for them."

By this point in the mission, Decker knew that when Laurie Galbraith made direct eye contact with him, he couldn't doubt her confidence, her absolute conviction of what she was saying: and there was no time for doubts now anyway. "Stan, get me hangar control," he ordered.

"On speaker," Dorian said.

"Hangar control, this is Decker. Move all shuttlecraft into storage alcoves and prepare to recover some damned fragile cargo. Make sure we clear up at least three thousand square meters of open space on the hangar deck." He shut the speaker off and fixed Galbraith with an imperative stare. "All right, Laurie, you get yourself into a suit, get down there, get some deck hands together and get those containers on board. I want 'em secured in six minutes. Remember, you'll have to do this in minimal gravity, so for God's sake don't knock 'em around too hard!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Decker's pat on her arm seemed to catapult Galbraith toward the turbolift.

"Helmsman, move us out ahead of the freighter," Decker said. "Lay a tractor beam on the containers and reel them into the hangar when it's ready."

"Yes, sir," Samuels said. "I just hope we've *got* six minutes before the Klingons get here."

Working swiftly and systematically, Edgerton and the rest of the boarding party tracked aft and manually released each container one at a time. Masada and Sanghevi chopped off the last one, as Edgerton stood, almost ceremoniously, at the hatch and watched through the viewport. The containers began to jostle into an elephant-like row, drifting away from the freighter as the *Constellation's* tractor beam enveloped them and pulled them into order.

"How are you doing over there, Richard?" Decker's voice blared in his helmet.

"Last container is away, sir," he answered. "We'll be ready to beam back - "

"Commander!" Seppala called out from further aft. "Back here, we found something!"

"A moment, sir, stand by!" Edgerton beckoned to Masada and rushed back to the engineering section. They found Seppala and her two men standing at a great gap in the deck, a gap identical in shape to the ones filled by nearby antimatter pods.

"I think this tells us what happened to the crew," Seppala said.

"You mean whoever hit this ship jettisoned an antimatter pod out from under it, depressurized the entire ship and got rid of its crew without firing a shot?" Masada's voice was half disbelieving.

"Now who in bloody 'ell would go to *that* kind of trouble?" Edgerton wondered.

"The Ucans, that's who," Seppala said. "Takes all the trouble out of it, in fact. They sneak up underneath a ship, pinch out one of its pods and *bwoof*, it's all theirs."

"They could never pull that off with the *Constellation*," Sanghevi said dismissively. Suddenly she cast a doubtful look at her superiors. "Could they?"

"I'd rather not stick around and find out," Edgerton said. "Not when we're already going toe to toe with the Klingons out there." He punched the communicator button on his helmet. "Edgerton to *Constellation*. Ready for transport."

"You'll have to hold on for a little bit, Richard!" Decker grated in reply. "We've had to divert all power to boost our shields around both ships, we can't spare any for the transporter. Sit tight, we'll get you as soon as we can." He pounded the comm button on his chair and turned.

"McCreebie!"

"Less than four minutes to intercept now, sir!" McCreebie reported.

"Damn it!" Decker growled, facing the screen. "There's never a temporal anomaly around when you need one."

Down below, Galbraith had gathered six deck hands in the airlock outside the shuttle hangar, where they stood watching the barometer drop toward zero. All of them wore environmental suits, and the six crewmen carried portable anti-grav manipulators. Galbraith herself bore a motion sensor which would alert her if any of the containers picked up too much inertia on its way into the hangar.

"Remember, men, we're working in minimal gravity," she told them. "Move each container as far forward as possible and maintain three meters of separation wherever you can."

"Suppose they're too big and heavy for these little beamers to handle?" one crewman asked, hefting his manipulator. "The Old Man said not to knock 'em together, didn't he?"

"For that matter, why can't we just use the transporter to bring them aboard?" another crewman shrugged.

"There's no time to explain," Galbraith said sharply. "Just carry out your orders!" She glanced at the barometer to see that the last of the pink condensate had vanished from the sight. "All right, men, the airlock is depressurized. Let's go!" She strode through the double-door hatch into the hangar and almost immediately flew off her feet as she encountered the one-tenth gravity to which the hangar was adjusted. Half the men followed: the others hesitated, unsure of this complete stranger who had replaced Laurie Galbraith the moment she was promoted to lieutenant junior grade, this new and decisive Galbraith who two years ago had been happier with her plants than she was around people, this take-charge Galbraith who now had a task of vital importance to complete.

"Well, come on, you guys!" one of their crewmates shouted, beckoning. "Don't just stand around with your thumb up your ass, we got a job to do here!"

"What's next, snakes on a starship?" one of the doubters grumbled as he and his pals filed into the hangar.

The hangar doors slowly ground open to reveal the first pair of containers undulating along the tractor beam, only a few hundred meters distant. Galbraith stationed two crewmen a safe distance from the bulkhead in preparation to guide each one to rest. Then she led the others back toward the hangar doors and quickly examined both sides of the deck to ascertain that the shuttlecraft were all safely tucked away.

"Galbraith to bridge," she called, puffing with the effort of keeping her footing in the minimal gravity. "We're recovering the containers now. How long do we have before the Klingons pose a threat?"

"We'll worry about the Klingons, you worry about the cargo," Decker told her. "But the sooner you get it on board, the better. I don't want to have to maneuver in mid-recovery." He leaned forward in his chair. "How close are they now, Danny?"

"Eighty thousand kilometers, drawing up on our starboard side," Samuels said.

"Put 'em on screen." Decker clenched his jaw as the three Klingon attack cruisers became clearly visible, charging toward the *Constellation* almost bow on. Three against one - not odds he was keen on in the middle of a recovery operation.

"Is it *Kobayashi Maru* in here, or is it just me?" Samuels said to no one in particular. Evidently he wasn't fond of the odds either.

"Zhour, stand by on phasers!" Decker said. "Prepare to - " He paused, chafing with frustration, scarcely believing the order he was about to give. "Prepare to drop shields from the freighter."

Half the eyes on the bridge turned on him, horrified. "But sir, what about the boarding party?" Marlowe protested.

"They may be better off than we're going to be in a few minutes," Decker said. "Hold your course. Laurie! How are you coming down there?"

"We've got half of them aboard, sir," Galbraith answered. "We just need - oh, my God, watch out, watch out, *watch out!*"

A collective gasp sucked almost all the oxygen out of the *Constellation's* bridge. The only one not frozen solid was Decker, as he burst out of his chair and spun toward it. "What's going on down there?!" he demanded. "*Laurie!* God damn it, *answer me!*"

Chapter 9

The seconds dragged interminably by, as they are wont to drag in times of great stress. All hands braced and all breathing halted. The *Constellation*, however, lumbered onward; it showed no awareness of its imminent destruction, no sign of exploding from the keel up. Finally Decker gyrated around to the side of his chair.

"Decker to hangar bay!" he hollered into the speaker. "Lieutenant Galbraith, report!"

"We're okay, Commodore." Galbraith's voice was breathless with relief when she finally replied. "Cavanaugh and Doubting Thomas here were so busy grumbling about taking my orders that they weren't paying attention to their jobs, and two of these containers almost collided. But we got them safely on deck. We've got three more to grab!"

The numerous mollified sighs returned atmospheric pressure on the bridge to slightly above normal. "All right, Laurie, you've got less than a minute to finish up," Decker advised. "Zhour!"

"Phasers and torpedoes ready, sir," Zhou said. "The Klingons are in range!"

"They're breaking formation," McCreddie added. "One still coming straight at us. One's swinging around to our port side and one's coming up astern."

Grinding his teeth, Decker cursed silently. He had no more risk-free alternatives and no more time to dream up any new ones. He looked up at Zhou.

"Drop shields from the freighter," he snapped.

"Sir, we've still got people - "

"Don't argue with me! Helmsman, come right to course zero two zero mark seven! Don't lose the cargo!" Decker sat, squashing the arm of his chair in one fist, and clenching the other around his pair of computer disks. "Run a firing solution on the torpedo data computer!"

One of the Klingon attack cruisers dashed across the screen as the *Constellation* swung starboard to face its assailants head on. The lead cruiser was still rushing straight at them: the third had to alter course and speed to match the starship's maneuver. Decker wished in vain that there was something he could say to Edgerton, some reassurance he could offer, but in his heart of hearts his first officer had to know any landing mission could come to this. The only hope he had was that the freighter would be worthless to the Klingons with its containers detached - but what, then, was to stop them from destroying it?

"Klingons are locking torpedoes," McCreddie said tersely.

"Laurie...." Decker urged through gritted teeth.

"The third one's taking aim at the freighter!" Zhou exclaimed.

"Hard about!" Decker barked. "Deflectors at full power!"

"Last one, Commodore!" Galbraith called out. "All containers aboard, hangar bay securing now!"

"Lock phasers on target!" Decker shouted at Samuels. "Ready and - "

Suddenly the bridge erupted in curses and shouts and cries of pain as an unexplainable, unbelievable, unquantifiable blast of heat erupted from almost every surface. Samuels and Marlowe both leaped instinctively out of their seats, Zhou almost fell over backward. Decker tried to punch the comm button on his chair, but snarled unintelligible blasphemy as he found even that searing hot to the touch. A blinding flash of light pervaded the bridge, and for a moment it seemed as if everyone was about to be cooked alive by a sourceless fusion explosion.

But then the light faded, though the heat remained: and in front of the viewscreen stood an elderly man with clasped hands and thick white hair. He wore a placid smile and a burgundy-colored tunic with a curiously patterned square collar.

"Please, forgive the intrusion, ladies and gentlemen," he said in a gentle voice. He paid no mind to the security guard standing by the turbolift who pounced forward, pulling his phaser and immediately dropping it with a sharp yelp as it burned his palm.

"We'll see about that," Decker snapped. "Who do you think you are, and how did you get on board my ship?!"

"You may call me Trefayne. I'm a member of the Organian Council of Elders. As for how I came on board your ship, well, that's really not important, is it? The important thing, Commodore Decker, is that neither you nor your enemies are able to prosecute your war any longer."

"I'll give you prosecution, and how the hell do you know who I am?"

"Oh, we Organians know a great deal more of you than you suspect. Thanks to your Captain James Kirk, we know that you and the Klingons are insistent upon violently destroying each other, and you believe we're infringing on your killer instinct. A most peculiar hill to die on, I must say. So we've taken it upon ourselves to intervene and put a stop to all this distasteful foolishness."

Decker scoffed and shook his head. "Jim Kirk. I might have known." He turned as the intercom whistled.

"Hangar deck to bridge!" Galbraith's cry over the comm speaker was frantic. "Commodore, I don't know what just happened here, but these cargo containers just suddenly turned red-hot! I don't know what the contents are doing, they might be about to explode, I can't even estimate

the temperature!"

"Three hundred and fifty degrees, to be precise," Trefayne supplied. "On your Fahrenheit scale, that is. But fear not, the devilish chemical compound you've brought onto your ship is in no more danger than you."

"Relax, Laurie," Decker said to the speaker. "Don't ask how, but it's under control up here." Seeing the security guard stepping slowly toward Trefayne, he waved for him to stand down.

"In fact, Commodore," Trefayne went on, "I implore you to destroy it. You were searching for a way to dispose of it even before you retrieved it, but there can only be one way - return to the star that spewed it forth, and let the star take back what it created."

"What star?"

"I'll show you." Trefayne stepped into the well of the bridge and motioned at the navigation console. "If you'll permit me?"

Still standing a safe distance from the isle, Marlowe raised both her hands without a word. Trefayne moved to the console and lightly tapped several of its buttons. Then he stood back and said to Decker: "There. I've given you the location of the star, the only safe place to excise this substance. And I *do* suggest you make haste, Commodore. A great evil is coming to your space, a force of unthinkable destruction."

Decker shook his head in bemusement. "What are you talking about? What kind of force?"

"Even the Organians have no knowledge of what lies beyond our borders. But you must hurry, Commodore Decker. Terrible, horrible devastation and death, beyond your most ghastly nightmares, is already upon you, and you must destroy your newly acquired cargo lest it make matters even worse. I've shown you the way; I beg of you to take the first step on your journey."

Trefayne's voice had taken on a strange, thready reverberation. He spread his arms again, his smile was gone, but his face still kindly and serene, as he dissolved into a great blinding orb of purplish-white light that lasted only a few seconds before it faded away to nothing.

For nearly a full minute there was total stillness on the *Constellation's* bridge. The instruments beeped and hummed, the ship sallied forth through space, but no one moved, no one voiced their incomprehension of what had just transpired before their eyes. No one even knew what to make of the Organians anymore.

"Did we really just see that?" It was Dorian who finally voiced everyone's collective thought.

"And if we did..." Veltanoa's voice was flat. "Who, or what, was it?"

"*That*," Decker said slowly, "was a new life form if I've ever encountered one. McCreddie, did you get any readings on it?"

"Just...an unidentifiable form of energy was all the sensors registered," McCreddie said. He bent over the sensor viewer. "Sir, the Klingons are hauling off. Forming back up and returning to their own space. This character must have had a few choice words with them, too."

"Well, so much for the war," Samuels commented.

"If only the last one could have ended this fast." Marlowe stared blankly at the bulkhead beneath the viewscreen.

"Well," Decker said, "if we're supposed to believe....whatever that was, what's this star we're supposed to head for?"

"Not the second to the right and straight on till morning, I bet," Samuels quipped.

"No." Marlowe moved cautiously back toward her console, reached down to tap it and found it no warmer than usual. She switched on one of the display screens at the side of the bridge, input the coordinates, and nodded at the screen. "That one, sir. Designated M-four-two-seven. That's actually one of the sectors we were scheduled to pass through on our original plot."

"Very well." Decker took a slow breath. "All right, Stan, notify the transporter room to get Edgerton's party back on board. Tara, lay in a course for that star." He moved to the aft side of the bridge well and beckoned to Veltanoa. "I'd feel a lot safer with magnotritium nitrate on board if we can enable a containment field around the shuttle hangar to augment the stasis fields. See what you can fix up."

"Yes, sir," Veltanoa said. "A pity to destroy it. One wonders what power it could be useful for besides mass destruction."

"For that matter," Zhou chimed in, "one wonders what destructive power could be even greater."

A piqued frown darkened Decker's visage. "We're bearing the One Ring," he said distantly.

"Sir?" Veltanoa stared at him.

"From an old volume of classic Earth literature called 'The Lord of the Rings'. On the hand of its creator, the One Ring held destructive power beyond anyone's imagination. It was forged in the fires of a volcano, and that was the only place it could be destroyed. I think that's what this Trefayne guy was getting at. The only star that can safely absorb this magnotritium is the same star that spat it out to begin with. I think he was right, we'd better get rid of it just as soon as we can, before someone else comes looking to get a hold of it."

"Of course, sir," Veltanoa acknowledged.

"Commodore," Dorian announced. "Boarding party has beamed back from the freighter and will be ready to debrief within the hour."

"Very well," Decker said. "Secure from general quarters. Mr. Zhou, the bridge is yours. I'm in the mood for some coffee."

Decker had just finished his second cup when Edgerton, Seppala, and Masada trooped into the briefing room and took their usual seats around the head of the table. Edgerton was first to confide: "I hadn't high hopes for that one. But we made sure to upload our readings on the freighter's interior to the ship's main computer in case we didn't make it back." He nodded toward Masada, who was drumming up the data on his computer terminal.

"And there was absolutely no trace of the crew?" Decker queried.

"There wouldn't be," Seppala shook her head. "Not if it was assaulted by Ucans. They're a nomadic scavenger race, and for years now they've been taking advantage of the tension between the Federation and the Klingons to attack neutral freighters without getting bagged for it. They always seem to know just where to rip out a ship's antimatter pods to depressurize the interior and the crew with it."

"Hmm," Decker mused. "They must've heard the same rumors we did, but when they found out the freighter was carrying magnotritium nitrate instead of praxium, they found themselves ill-equipped to handle it." He turned to Masada. "Is that crud stable for now, at least?"

"Seems to be. I won't get any readings on it through the stasis fields. As a matter of fact, I'm not even convinced the stasis fields will last, trying to hold a compound as volatile as that. Someone will have to monitor it around the chronometer." Masada bent over the computer console and rested his head on his fingers, frowning.

"What is it?" Edgerton ventured.

"I just hope the magnotritium is within its half-life. We don't know when it was harvested, and if one of those stasis fields should fail, there's no telling when combustion will occur and there's no containing the explosion."

"M-427 is a few weeks distant at maximum warp," Edgerton said. "Assuming the magnotritium was harvested, say, two or three months ago, and it's likely to take a couple more months to return there if we proceed at safe cruising speed without making any of our scheduled stops...." He looked at Masada questioningly.

"The sooner we ditch it, the better," Masada said firmly.

"Well, then, we'd better get a move on." Decker was about to rise when Seppala sat up straight.

"Commodore, I'd like to make a recommendation," she said. "The Klingons are more than likely to let it slip that we found the freighter before they did. If another motley crew of scavengers or pirates gets wind of it, we might find ourselves fending them off at every star we pass."

"Then your recommendation is....?"

"A circuitous course. Make it look like we're detouring toward different star systems, but hold a base course toward M-427. It'll take a little longer, but less time than dropping out of warp to do battle with some vagabond every ten minutes."

"Seems a wise precaution, sir," Edgerton commented.

"Very well," Decker acknowledged. "Get with Lieutenant Marlowe when she's off watch and work that course up. But make sure it's randomized enough so even Lieutenant Galbraith can't identify a pattern to it. Toshiro, if that compound bears constant watching, then let's put one chemical technician and one security guard in the hangar at all times. You and Anita draw up a watch list."

"Yes, sir," Masada nodded, echoed at once by Seppala.

"As of this moment," Decker went on, "the *Constellation* is under a total communications blackout. There'll be no messages to Starfleet Command and no response to any messages they send us. They'll likely list us as missing in action for a while, but I'll assume responsibility for explaining things after we've unloaded our cargo."

"Shouldn't we at least inform Starfleet that we're deviating from our planned course?" Masada objected.

"Not on your life. They'll want an explanation, and I'm not taking any chances on anyone else finding out what we're dragging around with us. That'll be all. Dismissed."

"Sure as hell didn't see that coming," Masada confided to Dorian over a light snack in the officers' lounge. "You think Captain Tyler knew about this?"

"Doubt it," Dorian shook his head. "I can just imagine what he'd say if he found out what that freighter was really carrying."

"Well, unfortunately, imagining is about all you can do. Decker's determined to hush this thing up. He's ordering a total communications blackout until our hangar bay is clear of that junk."

"So I hear. But he can order whatever he wants. If he knows any Section Thirty-one subspace frequencies, I'm a Romulan thunderbird hatchling."

Masada looked both ways and leaned furtively across the table. "Do you think Captain Tyler should even know about this, though? Magnotritium is nothing to mess with, Stan. The only reason to compound it with a nitrate is to obliterate the entire surface of a planet. That freighter had to be bound for Klingon space, there's no way the Federation would weaponize something like that."

"So who do you suppose created the compound?" Dorian shrugged. "Honest question."

"Damned if I know. But if I was Decker, I'd do just what that Organian said and chuck it at my earliest convenience."

"But would you believe what the Organian said about an even greater destructive force?" Dorian fixed him with a penetrating look.

Masada sat back and shook his head. "I shudder to think, Stan, I really do. I think we'd better go along with Decker on this. The less people know what we're carrying, the better. I don't even think most of the crew knows what's in those containers and I'd just as soon keep it that way."

"I still think it wouldn't hurt to find out who did the refining and make sure they don't get another crack at it."

"Well, it'll have to wait till this part of the mission's over with. If Decker susses out either one or both of us, there's gonna be hell to pay."

"Well, why do you think I'm playing devil's advocate so hard?" Dorian grinned. He was relieved to see the response grin from Masada and feel the lightening of the mood - but he'd be more relieved to know who had produced that deadly destructive compound, and where.

'We still have our journey and our errand before us,' answered Gandalf. 'We have no choice but to go on, or to return to Rivendell.'

Pippin's face brightened visibly at the mere mention of return to Rivendell; Merry and Sam looked up hopefully. But Aragorn and Boromir made no sign. Frodo looked troubled.

'I wish I was back there,' he said. 'But how can I return without shame - unless there is indeed no other way, and we are already defeated?'

'You are right, Frodo,' said Gandalf: 'to go back is to admit defeat, and face worse defeat to come. If we go back now, then the Ring must remain there: we shall not be able to set out again. Then sooner or later Rivendell will be besieged, and after a brief and bitter time it will be destroyed. The Ringwraiths are deadly enemies, but they are only shadows yet of the power and terror they would possess if the Ruling Ring was on their master's hand again.'

'Then we must go on, if there is a way,' said Frodo with a sigh. Sam sank back into gloom.

Decker lifted his eyes from the page, his ears filled with the strains of low-toned string and brass music and his mind filled with an image from an old motion picture. The days had protracted into weeks, and the *Constellation* still darted hither and yon across the L-300 sector bound for M-400, sensor watch constant and navigation board always alight with an imminent course change. One hour it would be closing in on L-319, then the next it would divert abruptly to L-308, set course to orbit one of that system's planets, then veer off at the last moment and head for L-344. At the end of the first week, Decker was ready to note a commendation into Marlowe's record for keeping the ship out of spying sights; it even gave him time to relax in his quarters and read the very novel that this undertaking had evoked.

The bookish Kirk had gifted him with *The Lord of the Rings* on the occasion of his promotion to captain six years earlier - just over three hundred years after its first publication. Anniversary notwithstanding, the three books had broken all records short of Shakespeare by remaining in print for all three of those centuries. The transit toward M-427 gave Decker a chance to digest a few chapters while listening to musical scores from the twentieth- and twenty-first-century motion picture adaptations. The mission objective itself had spurred him to name the mission "Operation Orodruin", and apply an individual designation to each of the magnotritium containers in case of an incident: they were now all named after dark, evil places described in the novel. He'd even begun to think that the "M" of the destination star might as well stand for "Mordor."

This chapter, "A Journey in the Dark", seemed amply appropriate to the *Constellation's* trek across the trackless wastes of deep space. Yet Kirk had told him how often he'd found inspiration in the next chapter - "The Bridge of Khazad-dûm" - when he was about to take some sort of defensive-aggressive action. Decker listened intently to the slow, pitched strings of the musical score and gazed sightlessly at the bulkhead across the room, picturing the image of a gray-headed old wizard standing off against a giant, fire-spouting demon deep beneath the earth.

The door buzzer pierced his reverie, and he reached over to turn down the music. "Enter," he responded, laying the book aside.

T'Prea stepped in, glancing around until she saw Decker getting up from his lounge chair. Galbraith was with her: both women were serious of countenance.

"Apologies for disturbing you, sir," T'Prea said. "However, I have reason to suspect your orders for subspace silence have been violated. I have identified a clandestine communication pattern which Lieutenant Galbraith has corroborated."

"Someone's sending secret messages to Earth, sir," Galbraith added. "So secret we can't even identify the recipient."

"Have you identified the sender, at least?" Decker asked.

T'Prea nodded. "Yes, sir. There is a definite logic to the pattern, if not to the content. I believe it is a senior officer."

Decker was on the bridge within the hour. At his request, Edgerton and Dr. Jol were both on the bridge not long thereafter, arriving just as the *Constellation* banked into another turn and headed for the fourth planet of L-318.

"You really outdid yourself, Richard," Decker remarked to Edgerton. "We haven't encountered another ship since God knows when. You and Marlowe did a hell of a job keeping us off the sensor grids."

"Well, the God's honest truth is, sir," Edgerton said with a small smile, "we haven't done a bloody thing. Ms. Marlowe has us on a base course for M-427, but every maneuver we make is random and unplanned."

"So much the better. Doctor, what readings are you getting from the Starlife system?"

Jol took a deep breath. "Well, we're all feeling a little uneasy with what we're doing, between carrying a highly destructive chemical compound

and avoiding all communications," he replied. "But the levels of epinephrine in our brains have diminished a bit from where they were at the beginning of this mission, since we've settled into somewhat of a routine without any unexpected encounters."

"Well, that's helpful. It'll make what I have to do now a lot easier."

"Beg your pardon, sir?" Edgerton was confused.

"Let me tell you something, Richard. When you get a command of your own, Captain's Mast will be one of the most thankless parts of the job. But it's best to let these times come when the stress level is lowest." Decker turned to face the turbolift as it hissed open. T'Prea and Seppala stepped out, the latter waiting by the lift and the former walking over to stand beside Dorian.

"I relieve you, Mr. Dorian," she announced.

Frowning, Dorian stared up at her, pulling out his ear antenna. "No, you don't. My watch isn't over for another three and a half hours."

"Ah, no, Mr. Dorian," Decker said, turning his chair in the other direction to face him. "You're damn well relieved."

He was glowering. T'Prea was expressionless as always. Seppala stood by the turbolift, ogling him, phaser on her hip. Masada, unsurprisingly, was looking busy at his station, pretending not to be paying any attention. At length Dorian looked back at Decker. "May I ask what this is about, sir?"

"Well, if you need me to be Commodore Obvious," Decker said sarcastically. "You disregarded my orders, Mr. Dorian. I imposed a total communications blackout on this ship until we reach M-427, which you, as senior communications officer, were expected to enforce. But you've been having some very private conversations with someone back on Earth. Private enough that you've been using three-factor encryption."

"Sir, I - I don't know what you're talking about." Dorian was shaking his head vigorously, obviously bluffing. T'Prea, however, could see it just as clearly.

"The commodore's logic is unassailable, Mr. Dorian," she stated. "We have not yet disposed of our cargo, but you have maintained regular communications with an unknown entity ever since we departed the Scorpius Cluster. Therefore, you disobeyed his orders for a total communications blackout."

"How would you know if I've been sending out encrypted transmissions?" Dorian was clearly growing agitated: he shook both head and hands with aggrievance and his eyes were like daggers of fear.

"By means of a Vulcan method called *rol'satra*. I am unable to decipher the content of your communiqués, but nevertheless I have identified the pattern in which you've been sending them. Over the last five days, each communiqué has gone out within ten minutes of either your relief from duty or your return to it, and has always been sent using the D-eleven-dash-five subspace filament - which happens to connect directly to your quarters."

Dorian looked like a Caitian that had just gotten caught eating a Skorr. Decker flashed a sardonic smile. "Never underestimate Vulcan women's intuition. Bad enough you forgot that T'Prea here is an expert cryptologist. I don't know what you're up to, mister, and I don't care. If you're trying to leave someone a trail of breadcrumbs, you just ran out of baking soda and you're gonna sit the rest of this mission out."

Slowly Dorian rose, eyeing Decker, then looking at T'Prea and then Seppala, neither of whom he could hope to contest even if they didn't have a nerve pinch and a phaser at their disposal. Then he glanced at Masada, who was now giving the proceeding his undivided attention.

"Am I restricted to quarters, sir?" he inquired.

"Where you can find inventive new ways to send secret messages on overencrypted frequencies to your pal back home? Nothing doing. You're going to the goddamn brig until we ditch the cargo."

"With me, Mr. Dorian. Now." Seppala stepped closer, hand on her phaser, staring at Dorian like a Kzinti sentinel. Deflated, Dorian glanced obliquely at Masada again.

"Pity I can't bring along my Quebec uniform and echo some echo golf," he remarked. He caught Masada's narrowing eyes before he slowly walked around T'Prea and entered the turbolift, Seppala close behind him. T'Prea, meanwhile, sat at the communications station and inserted her ear antenna as if nothing had happened.

Seeing that she was preoccupied, Decker faced forward and leaned over toward Dr. Jol. "What's this pattern recognition method she mentioned again?"

"*Rol'satra*," Jol said. "It's a behavioral pattern identifier. Are you familiar with *pon farr*?"

"Can't say as I am, no."

"Well, *rol'satra* is what Vulcan women use to prepare themselves for *pon farr*," Jol said with a wry half-smile.

"Just think, sir," Edgerton said. "If you'd gotten the *Enterprise*, you'd have a Vulcan first officer and you'd probably be finding out what *pon farr* is right about now."

"I think that's all I want to know," Decker asserted. "You can tell me more after we get this over with. Maintain our evasive pattern. And Richard, make damn sure Dorian doesn't have anyone tailing us already."

"Yes, sir," Edgerton acknowledged.

Again Masada pretended to look busy, but Dorian's parting words were still ringing with him. Something familiar. Something....Quebec uniform....those were old-style phonetic letters. Echo some echo golf....

He took a deep breath and focused. Leaving the bridge now would be too great a risk of giving himself away. But he knew Dorian had signaled this to him before. If he could just remember where.

"*Pon farr*, huh?"

"Yeah, when Vulcan dudes get horny on main. It's sort of like the seven-year itch they used to talk about centuries ago. In fact, that's exactly the interval it takes place in." Nordgren wore a suggestive half-grin as he refocused the photonic motion sensor on the southern hemisphere of the Gallus star.

"Can you imagine being a Vulcan woman married to a guy who's going through that?" His Mosalian pal, Evuk, was not quite as busy with logging the star's core activity as he was with discussing Vulcan biological imperatives.

"Well, the women have their ways of determining behavioral patterns so they can get ready for it. But it's no wonder Vulcan physiology has developed to the level it has, they'd never make it through otherwise."

The solar weather station on Gallus V was six miles underground, just beyond the point where both the solar activity and the atmosphere would be harmful to humanoid life. Nordgren, Evuk, and the other four heliophysicists assigned to the station had been here for the past eight months already, monitoring the Gallus star's solar activity to determine whether Gallus V, a Class G planet whose atmosphere was heavy with helium and argon, was a suitable candidate for terraforming. So far, they could take it or leave it, but they had found the day-to-day minutiae of studying the star monotonous enough that their conversations were bound to take some interesting turns.

"Well, then, I hope Hauser's got enough of a heart to let Sorkos get back home when it's his time to go through it," Evuk said.

Nordgren scoffed. "I'm more concerned about a ship getting out all this way in time. Hauser or no Hauser, if the Mayweather Institute can't - " He broke off and held rock-still in his posture. He could swear he had just felt a sudden tremor under his feet. The panel on which his hands rested also trembled slightly, he was sure of it. He frowned and looked over at Evuk. "Did you feel that?"

Evuk stared at the floor between his feet. Another tremor reached up into his legs, and a legipad on the table beside him shifted position by a few millimeters.

"I felt it that time," he said nervously.

Nordgren crossed to a communication panel on the opposite wall. "Heliophysics level, this is core monitoring. Are you feeling any ground shakes up there?"

Hauser's raspy, 73-year-old voice, as irritated as it was irritating, responded condescendingly. "I don't feel nothin'. You'd know if somethin' was happening if you was watchin' out for coronal mass ejections like you're supposed to."

"That was no CME, Eddie, unless you're getting some readings we aren't."

Leaning negligently back in his chair, Hauser rested his head on it and rolled his beady eyes. "Look, I been doin' this for fifty years," he said sharply. "And I grew up in northern California. We get an earthquake, I'll know it long before you feel anythin'."

Sorkos walked behind him and flipped several switches on the surface activity sensor. "I detect no unusual tectonic activity anywhere on this landmass," he informed Hauser.

Overhearing this on the comm speaker, Nordgren scoffed again. "You weren't in bed when the earth moved, were you, Sorkos?"

"Hardly a logical assumption, Mr. Nordgren, since my duty rotation does not expire till twenty-one hundred." Sorkos's response bordered on snarky, but his hand rested flat on the control console as it inexplicably vibrated under his fingertips.

"Feel that now?" Evuk said. "That's no earthquake, my friends. It's coming in repeating pulses. I think this planet's under attack!"

"Oh, who the hell would be attackin' this godforsaken rock?" Hauser groused. "There's no one else out here at the ass end of nowhere but us."

"Well, *someone* sure is!" Evuk exclaimed. "If I didn't know better, I'd think someone's dropping stratobombs up top!"

Nordgren's blood ran cold. Evuk's people had just recovered from a planetwide war when Federation explorers first visited, and found the devastation on Mosalias even more calamitous than the surface of Earth after World War III. Stratobombs were a uniquely Mosalian weapon, and it was a relief to think of them in the past tense....but could the tense still be past now?

The ground shook again, this time rocking the chairs, and sending miscellaneous tools sliding across tabletops to strike the wall.

"Hell with this, I'm making a distress call," Nordgren snapped. He left the speaker to the heliophysics level active and ran for a subspace communication station nearby. "To any Federation vessel in the vicinity of Gallus Five, this is Solar Weather Station Gamma Zulu. We are under attack by an unknown force! Please respond and render assistance!"

No response. The ground shook again, still more violently than before, so violently even Hauser could no longer ignore it. Evuk stumbled, catching himself on the tabletop. He shot a pleading look at Nordgren, who breathed like a bellows in a forge, desperately awaiting a reply.

"Might not be stratobombs, but whatever they are, they're awfully big and awfully close," Evuk exhorted.

"Any Federation vessel that can hear me!" Nordgren repeated. "This is Solar Weather Station Gamma Zulu on planet Gallus Five! Please respond and render aid! This planet is under attack by an unidentified force and is being shaken apart!"

"Who in the hell...." Hauser was uncomprehending of what was happening around him. Another thundering, rocking tremor shook dust and bits of geology loose from the enclosure. This time, the tremor lasted so long that the rumble lingered for several seconds.

"We are experiencing major subspace interference," Sorkos said. "It is doubtful our transmissions are being received!" He took another look at the monitor screen. "I read an unidentified object in orbit! It is firing on the planet with some sort of high-energy anti-matter beam!"

"Any vessel near Gallus Five, please, answer!" Nordgren cried. "This is Federation science station Gamma Zulu! We are under attack! For God's sake, help us!"

The ground heaved violently under him. He and Evuk were both thrown off their feet: Evuk's head struck the edge of the table, and he collapsed, unconscious. Nordgren struggled back to his knees and scabbled desperately for the communications console.

"Somebody answer me!" he screamed. "We're going to die here! Help us, *please, help* - "

The blindness, the burning sensation, the ear-shattering crash all came at once and all so rapidly that none of the Federation heliophysicists of the ill-fated planet of Gallus V were even able to perceive it. One moment, Nordgren was screaming for aid, Hauser was wondering what the hell was happening to him, Sorkos was trying to analyze the strange object attacking them: the next, instantaneous incineration, a planet completely pulverized and nothing but aggregate remnants adrift in cold, empty space.

Chapter 10

Medical log, Stardate 3741.4. The Constellation has been underway for three weeks now, on a mission with an objective so super-secret that Commodore Decker still refuses to permit any communication to or from Starfleet. The ship's Starlife system is in good working order, as evidenced by its readings indicating abnormal heart rates, fatigue, nervousness and diminished executive functioning. I have asked Commodore Decker to call upon sick bay to report my findings to him and hopefully get a better idea of what his intentions are.

Decker entered Jol's office in the sickbay just as the doctor came out of the research lab, pulling on a blue jacket over his short-sleeved tunic. "You wanted to see me, Doctor?" Decker inquired.

"Yes, sir, with regard to the Starlife system," Jol said. He pointed at the display screen affixed to the bulkhead behind his desk. "It's definitely functioning as intended - it's detecting a shipwide elevation in confusion, stress, some cases of indecision and irritability. I don't know how much longer you intend this side trip to last, but I do know the crew is having an adverse reaction to it."

"Well, nobody should join Starfleet to begin with if all they're expecting is a pleasure cruise. But I think Mr. Edgerton knows better than either of us how much longer this 'side trip', as you so irreverently put it, should take."

"Just the same, sir, there was a bit of a stir the other day when you relieved Lieutenant Dorian from duty. If this does go on very much longer, you'll start observing decreased efficiency, emotional outbursts - if it reaches a higher extreme, even seditious behavior."

"Got a treatment in mind?"

"Well, for the time being, I've appointed Dr. E'Mero as the ship's psychotherapist. Anyone experiencing particularly high tension is encouraged to request a session with him, irrespective of their rank or position. But that's only a temporary measure. We've got to get this job over with sooner than later."

And return to our regularly scheduled surveying of dangerous planets was about to alight from Decker's tongue before Jol continued: "And as for you yourself, sir..."

"What about me myself? Did you forget the 'I'?"

"Not at all, sir." Jol pointed at one of the data streams nearest the top of the screen, standing out in yellow print with a long two-toned line. "You're showing one of the highest cortisol levels on the entire ship. This mission is taking its toll on you far more heavily than anyone else aboard."

"Do I need to reread my command orders for you? It comes with the territory."

"No, sir, but I am concerned - "

"Dr. Jol, when all unusually hazardous substances have been unloaded from my ship and we're ready to resume our prearranged course, I do solemnly swear that we'll divert directly to the nearest M-class planet that resembles a nature preserve, and there we'll all take a nice long shore leave. But in the meantime - "

Decker was about to reiterate his responsibility for the stress level when the intercom whistled. He crossed to the monitor screen on Jol's desk and answered the hail.

"Commodore, please report to the bridge," T'Prea said. "Commander Masada needs you to see something vitally important."

"I'll be right there." Decker shut the intercom off and looked back up at Jol. "This isn't our first difficult mission, and it won't be the last. Think of it as a chance to conduct some research into space psychology. If Casey Suslowicz was still with me, he'd jump at the chance."

"I don't doubt it, sir," Jol said with half a smile. "I just hope you're right about this not being our last mission."

Decker arrived on the bridge to find Masada standing beside the command chair. "More engine trouble from the *Lexington*?" he surmised.

"No, sir," Masada said, motioning at the main viewer. "Take a look at this."

The viewer was filled to all four corners with rubble, dust, and space debris. The *Constellation's* main deflector batted most of the flotsam out of the ship's path, but the relief helmsman still had to dodge and weave around the larger chunks to avert hull damage.

"An asteroid belt?" Decker's face contorted with cynicism, as if to ask *That's the so-called vitally important something you called me up here for?*

"Not just *any* asteroid belt, sir," Masada said. "This is all that's left of the L-372 system."

Decker stared at him, befuddled. "What do you mean, this is all that's left?"

"The entire system's been blown to bits. Eight planets, twenty-odd moons, approximately fifteen billion inhabitants - that's what we're looking at."

"My God," Decker muttered, leaning heavily on the back of his chair. "Do you have any idea at all what caused this?"

"Nothing specific. I'm reading traces of anti-protons on most of the debris, but there's no known weapon that could cause such a calamity. And ruling out a supernova, I can't think of any force of nature that could have done this, either."

"Fifteen billion people." Decker shook his head in dismayed disbelief.

"It gets worse," Masada said, stepping up to the science station. "I've been running some long-range scans. The L-370 system looks to have suffered the same fate, and so has Gallus and two or three other systems in our vicinity. But not a one of them has experienced a solar cataclysm of any sort."

There was a long silence. Decker watched the rocks and debris and asteroids slide past all corners of the viewer, trying to visualize the planets they had once been. The class, the topography, the ecosystems and populations....how heartbroken Maria would have been to witness such total devastation. To say nothing of the fifteen billion people who had suddenly woken up one morning to find the day of their doom had come.

Where had he been in the meantime? He should have been able to forestall whatever happened here.

"Ms. Marlowe, what's our ETA at M-427?" he asked finally.

"If we resume our base course, one hundred and thirty-eight hours, present speed," Marlowe answered.

"Increase speed to warp seven," Decker ordered. "I want this magnotritium off my ship before we try to find out what *other* planet-smashing forces are present."

"Warp seven, aye, sir," the helmsman acknowledged.

As the *Constellation* shuddered, hummed, and broke into a space-bending sprint, Decker saw Veltanoa turning toward him in his peripheral vision. "Commodore...."

"Relax and have a pickle, Veltanoa," Decker headed him off. "I know warp seven is pushing the envelope, but she can handle it. It'll only take eleven hours now to get where we're going instead of six days."

"That isn't really what concerns me, sir. The power necessary to maintain this speed will affect the integrity of the containment field we've raised around the hangar deck. Won't be more than a few hours before it starts to falter."

"If all goes well, we won't need it for much longer by that time. Just to be on the safe side, check the stasis fields of those containers again and make sure they aren't falling off on us."

"Shall we alert Starfleet about the destroyed planets?" Masada asked.

Decker gave him a sidelong glance and then turned his gaze back on the viewer. He sighed, lowered his head for a moment, and half turned. "How about it, T'Prea, how long will it take to get a hold of Starfleet?"

"You have not yet rescinded your order for subspace silence, sir," T'Prea said. "However, if you were to do so, extreme subspace interference is present in this area. I have been able to receive no transmissions for several hours now, either from the closest starbase or from any other nearby starship."

Decker folded his arms with a muttered curse and faced Masada. "Well, I guess that takes care of that. We may as well get this over with and make our way back here afterward, see if it hasn't cleared up at all. Maintain our base course. And in the meantime, why don't you run some more long-range scans and try to establish a pattern of any kind to these destroyed solar systems."

"Aye, sir," Masada muttered. After Decker had left the bridge, he glanced at T'Prea. "I can think of a few other patterns worth establishing around here."

"Of planetary devastation?" T'Prea queried.

"Of human behavior. Mark my words, T'Prea, Decker's leading us into a whole new circle of hell here."

"I'm afraid I lack a frame of reference, Commander, since Vulcan does not have a 'hell'."

"Well, we'd better keep an eye on him, or you're damn sure going to find one."

For the remainder of his watch, Masada alternated between scanning the destroyed solar systems and ranging ahead to detect any space weather effects the *Constellation* might have to dodge. As far as he could tell, the devastation reached almost beyond maximum sensor range: planetless stars surrounded by space rubble extended all the way to the outermost boundaries of the galaxy. The swath of destruction, he noted, seemed to be taking a disturbing direction toward the Rigel sector - but it had altered direction often enough that he couldn't be certain.

He'd have to keep an eye on it. If there was an imminent threat to Rigel, that might be the only thing that would change Decker's mind about the communications blackout.

As he scanned the interstellar weather ahead, he found Dorian's cryptic signal ringing in his head again. What had his clandestine co-operative been trying to tell him with that strange little turn of phrase? For some reason it echoed louder still since Decker hadn't even tried to signal Starfleet, interference or no interference, even to report the destruction of an entire solar system. How could a man be so single-minded....and what if Dorian had figured out something about Decker that Masada hadn't....and tried to signal him without making it obvious....but what the hell was "echo some echo golf" supposed to mean?

After Edgerton relieved him on watch, Masada took a roundabout stroll through the senior officers' section toward his quarters. He could feel the deck shuddering underfoot as the warp drive strained to hold a factor of seven. He ended up on the same path he and Dorian had walked from the briefing room to the officers' lounge after meeting Decker for the first time, and suddenly remembered the conversation they'd had.

And that was when it hit him.

Quebec. Uniform. Echo. Echo. Golf.

That was it. Masada nearly ran the rest of the way to his quarters and punched the computer interface switch.

"Computer," he said breathlessly.

"Working."

"Search historical database for following name: Philip Francis Queeg."

"Working." The computer briefly rattled its processor and responded in its usual mechanical monotone: "No such name exists in historical data bank."

"Okay," Masada muttered. He thought a moment. Decker was developing a taste for classical Earth literature - but Dorian's was already well honed.

"Cross-reference that name with Earth literary data bank," he ordered the computer.

"Working. One result. Philip Francis Queeg. Fictional character. Main character of historical novel 'The Caine Mutiny', copyright nineteen fifty-one by American novelist Herman Wouk."

"Stop," Masada said. "Display background information on the character and the role he plays in said novel." He switched on the monitor screen and rested his chin on his hand.

Philip Francis Queeg

Philip Francis Queeg is a fictional character appearing in the historical novel "The Caine Mutiny", (c) 1951 by American novelist Herman Wouk (1915-2019). Queeg is portrayed as the commanding officer of the U.S.S. Caine, a destroyer-minesweeper assigned to the Pacific theater of operations for the United States Navy during Earth's Second World War. Queeg is suspected by several of his officers of suffering from severe neurosis and paranoia. Partway through the novel, Queeg places the Caine and its crew at grave risk by sailing it through a massive tropical cyclone, during which his executive officer, Lieutenant Stephen Maryk, forcibly relieves him of command out of concern for the safety of the ship. The remainder of the novel focuses on the court-martial of Lieutenant Maryk over whether or not he committed mutiny by relieving Queeg of command, if he was so authorized under applicable United States Navy regulations.

Masada's pulse quickened, and he felt a sweat about eighty degrees colder than that which he'd felt pouring down his head aboard the Nevorian freighter. The further he read, the sharper Dorian's comparison of Decker to Queeg came into focus. It was when he came to the part about Queeg fidgeting with steel ball bearings during stressful moments that Masada had to fight the temptation to switch off the monitor and call Seppala.

He didn't even read the part about the outcome of the court-martial. He turned around and grabbed a large, hidebound book, titled STARFLEET CHARTER, from the shelf. By now he could open the book almost to the exact page that was so familiar to him, whenever he needed to refresh his memory about what his mission really was.

Art. 14, Sec. 31

This Article provides for a temporary Agency to be established by the Chief of Starfleet Security for purposes of investigation, observation, intelligence gathering, cultural research, or any other purpose such as may be deemed necessary by the CSS for the protection of United Earth interests and affairs. Such an Agency shall, at the sole discretion of the CSS, be permitted the use of extraordinary measures to be taken in times of extreme threat.

Well, this particular agency to which he and Dorian belonged was anything but temporary - it had been around ever since first contact with the Klingons. But at this point, the threat was not only extreme, it was compound, and not only in the chemical sense: whatever had destroyed those solar systems couldn't be far, and it could very easily be heading for a dense population center of the Federation, like the Rigel sector or Eridani.

For almost the next two hours Masada sat there, mulling over what the *Constellation* was flying away from and into: how ironic it seemed that Section 31, as he knew it now, had been created in response to the Klingon threat, and a scrape with Klingon forces had set the ship on this insane errand: and what extraordinary measures would have to be taken to neutralize this particular extreme threat. And yet, that brought his mind to focus on one overarching question: exactly *which* threat was the most extreme? The *Constellation's* cargo, its commanding officer, or whatever was out there blasting entire solar systems to bits? At first glance it was a no-brainer, but Decker's single-minded fixation on destroying the cargo could expose other systems to ruin if the *Constellation* was out of position to intercede.

He was more convinced than ever of what he'd told Dorian, that it would be best to follow through with Decker's intentions for the time being. But with Dorian now in the brig, he was dangerously close to exposure. At the very least, Edgerton should know what turns this mission was liable to take. And the two of them would have to keep a close eye on Decker in tandem, lest the commodore's perseverance, driven by grief and guilt, prove to be disastrous for the *Constellation* and all hands aboard.

Decker was sure he'd never gone this long without making a log entry, even before he took command of the *Constellation*. But no one must know - absolutely no one. Dorian's duplicitous behavior had underlined the chance he couldn't afford to take. Flying in close to M-427 - an F-5 main-sequence star almost half-again the mass of Earth's own sun - was dicey enough. They were now only a few hours from the star itself,

but Veltanoa's warning had proved to be prophetic: after eight hours of blating along at warp 7, they could place more stock in the stasis fields of the magnotritium containers than they could in the containment field around the hangar deck.

At least this system's planets were all still in one piece. Yet those smashed solar systems reminded Decker of Trefayne's warning of a great destructive force coming to Federation space. How annoyingly inconvenient of the old Organian not to be able to tell them the exact nature of the force: the more Decker thought it over, the more certain he was that such a power was the only power that could have caused such apocalyptic devastation.

The *Constellation* was now shaking, almost incessantly, its bulkhead plates rattling and its dilithium crystals vibrating in their chambers. The containment field around the hangar deck weakened by the hour. Deck hands had to pull extra duty to prevent the containers from undulating across the hangar deck and colliding. As they came within an hour of M-427, Decker moved from the command chair to the scanning station at the side of the bridge and sat there, finger on his lip, sorting out the factors. They could reduce speed when they got closer, extend the life of the containment field, and prevent the ship from shaking apart at the junctions, but he'd already learned his lesson from Dimidium and the *Leonis*. They could closely orbit the star to jettison the cargo, but....

"Toshiro," he said thoughtfully, half-turning toward Masada. "You have any theories on how closely we can fly by that star without getting sucked into a time distortion?"

"Been working on that, sir," Masada said. "The trick is making a close enough orbit so the cargo gets drawn into the star and we don't. We'll have to use the tractor beam as a repulsor to give it a little added inertia."

"So what do you figure, six, eight million kilometers?"

"I'd say closer than that. And there's another thing, Commodore. I think we'll be needing to release each container one at a time. If we shove them all in there at once, we could destabilize the star's core and then we'd have a nova on our hands."

"Well, there's always a catch, isn't there?" Decker muttered.

"I'm afraid so, sir. We'll have to maintain a speed of at least warp two to avoid being roasted alive."

Decker sighed and scratched his jaw. Jim Kirk always used to say risk was part of the game if you wanted to sit in that chair. "Game" was an interesting way of looking at it, though....

He stood up and turned toward the well. "Red alert," he ordered. "Veltanoa, lay to the hangar deck. Double down the shuttlecraft, take safety precautions for the deck hands so they don't go out of the hangar along with the containers." Veltanoa acknowledged and made haste to the turbolift as Decker returned to the command chair. "Tara, I want to assume an elliptical orbit around that star," he said to Marlowe. "Get me no closer than five million kilometers. We'll drop a container, haul off, cool down, and then take another run at it."

"Aye, aye, sir," Marlowe nodded, and bent over her console.

Decker turned as Samuels, Zhou, and Jost Hasselmann, the assistant engineering officer, rushed out of the turbolift to take their stations amidst the blaring howl of the red alert siren. "Just in time, gents," he remarked. "Zhou, bring your deflectors up to full intensity and modulate them for solar radiation. Danny, I hope you got your rest. You've got a lot of speed and course changes ahead of you."

"Sounds like it'll be just like Ouray Pass back home," Samuels said with a confident smile. He plopped down at the helm, but his smile - and possibly also his confidence - vanished as he looked at Marlowe's navigation board. "Wait a minute, we're going in *that close* to an F-five main sequence?" he said in disbelief.

"Sure it's Ouray Pass and not Toltec Gorge?" Marlowe said with a wry smile.

"Well, at least Toltec Gorge is a little further away from the sun," Samuels said apprehensively.

"Reduce speed to warp three," Decker said. "Just keep us out of a gravity flux and keep us the hell out of the photosphere. Tara?"

Marlowe sat back and turned. "Our orbit will take us to a periapsis of five million kilometers and an apoapsis of one hundred million," she said. "Should give the hull enough time to cool off between passes."

"Very well. Let's do this. Put me on speakers, T'Prea."

"Aye, sir." T'Prea snapped open the intercraft channel and turned. "All decks standing by."

"Listen up, people. This is Commodore Decker. Take a moment and look at that crest you're wearing on your uniforms. That's the crest of the U.S.S. *Constellation*. From today on forward, anyone you meet is going to see that crest, and they're going to look at you with awe and respect. They're going to say, 'I'll be damned, I'm standing in the same room breathing the same air as someone from the *Constellation*, someone who destroyed destruction, someone who kept our Federation safe from a deadly force I can't even imagine!' They'll buy you a drink and ask you to tell them a story about serving on this ship, protecting our space, and forestalling interplanetary war. After today, the number one thousand and seventeen is going to set a numerical standard every damn body in Starfleet will strive to meet, one way or another. You know it like I know it, so now I'm going to shut the hell up and we're going to get this job done. We're going to see to it no Federation planet ever faces the threat of annihilation ever again. All hands, sharp to the action!"

He shut the speaker off and leaned forward in his chair. "All right, John Wayne time. Mr. Samuels, bring us in. T'Prea, keep me open to the hangar deck. Let's do what we came for and unload this holy terror!"

Chapter 11

The *Constellation* lunged at the star like a ravenous shark. The temperature on the bridge rose by the minute, reached discomfort level in five. Samuels's hands, however, were sweating long before then. Zhou bent over the tactical console, searching any energy source from which he could squeeze some extra reinforcement into the heat shields. Nevertheless he felt light-headed already: Andorians are native to colder environments, and even upper-reach Class N planets are terribly uncomfortable for them, to say nothing of flying in close to 6,500-Kelvin main-sequence stars.

"Mr. Hasselmann...." He took a breath. "I don't think we'll be needing the phasers here if you wouldn't mind diverting some of that power to the shields."

"Gladly, Herr Zhou," Hasselmann smiled. "I think we come from similar climates, but I'm a long way from the Zugspitze."

Zhou smiled back, as grateful for the extra shield power as he was for the universal translator. But for that, even some of the Earth natives on the *Constellation* might have struggled with Hasselmann's thick Austrian accent - there was still a twinge of it even when translated to Andorian.

In the hangar, Veltanoa had made fast all the shuttlecraft and detailed half a dozen deck hands, tethered to the launch and recovery tracks, to give each container a zero-G push out of the hangar as the ship passed close to the star. It would be an exact reversal of the acquisition of the containers under Galbraith's supervision - and reckoning with a force of nature a thousand times deadlier than Klingons. The closer they came to the star, the more sinister and violent it looked. Marlowe's hands trembled on her console as she unblinkingly ogled their heading: Decker leaned forward in his chair and fingered his computer disks as if they were a wad of dough.

"Eight million kilometers and closing," Marlowe said breathlessly.

"Veltanoa, you ready down there?" Decker called out.

"Long ago, sir!"

"Sir, we're picking up speed," Samuels said. "Helm control is set to warp two, but we're approaching warp four velocity!"

"Cut to warp one!" Decker snapped. "Masada, gimme a report!"

"Gravimetric transients on the port bow," Masada said. "Sir, we'd better lean right, or we'll be in a distortion!"

"Samuels, come right, one eight eight mark two! Get ready to break away!" Decker mopped his damp forehead with his sleeve. "Hangar bay, stand by to jettison....and....*now!* Give Morgul the boot!"

He tensed and waited. The *Constellation* rocketed abeam of the star and then away, velocity dropping as the star's gravity began to outpull the warp field. Again time seemed to grind to a standstill.

"Morgul is released, sir!" Veltanoa called out.

"Zhou, repulsor beam! Shove it off!" Decker ordered. "Samuels, increase speed to warp four, get us the hell away from this star!"

"Happy to oblige, sir," Samuels exclaimed. "One down, seven to go!"

Masada leaned over the sensor viewer, but it was already so warm to the touch that he could only lightly rest his fingertips on it. "Morgul has fallen into the star's gravity well," he announced. "Going, going....*gone!*"

"All right, haul off!" Decker commanded. "Zhou, drop the shields, give 'em a chance to recharge. Veltanoa, which one's next?"

"Isengard, sir."

"Very well. Take a breather. I'll give her about fifteen minutes to cool down before the next pass."

The hair at Marlowe's temples was visibly dampened as she slid it behind her ear. She wiped a film of perspiration from her display and allowed Samuels a look, whereupon he peered into his sensor viewer and angled the ship toward the innermost planet of the system. He rubbed his upper lip and stared at the viewer as the planet, a rocky Class X affair with a volcanic surface, became visible as a flaming red globe, an appearance glaringly befitting the "Operation Orodruin" moniker of the mission.

"Hull temperature?" Decker inquired of Hasselmann.

"Four hundred Celsius and falling, Herr Kommodore."

"We should be so lucky to keep it that way," Samuels muttered.

"Yeah, we *should*," Marlowe agreed. "Passing inner planet to port."

"Coming around, reducing speed to warp two," Samuels responded.

"No unusual solar activity I can detect, sir," Masada called over his shoulder from the sensors.

"We should stay so lucky in that regard, too," Decker said. "Begin the second pass. Hangar, stand by with Isengard!"

None of the surrounding stars were visible in the viewer as the *Constellation* raced toward M-427 again. The star occupied most of the middle of the viewer, then drifted off to the left side as Samuels steered slightly away. Again the temperature elevated; again Zhou raised the heat shields, and squeezed every joule of power he could find into them; again the *Constellation* began to pick up speed, and Samuels helmed away still further.

"One half AU, closing fast," Marlowe panted. "We should be able to - " She broke off as the *Constellation* shook, heaving much further to starboard than Samuels had intended.

"What the hell was that?" Decker demanded, turning to Masada.

"Looks like a gust of stellar wind interfered with the warp field for a moment," Masada answered. "We're still making warp two....gravimetric drag is pulling us toward warp three velocity!"

"Ease us off, helmsman," Decker said. "Zhour, how are the shields holding up?"

"Taking as much as they can, sir." Zhou was even shorter of breath than Marlowe. "More than I'm able to, if I'm being honest. I would recommend....a few more minutes of cool-down time after we complete this pass."

"Recommendation noted. Bearing to the star?"

"Three zero five relative," Masada replied. "At this speed, we have twenty-two seconds till we can unload Isengard."

Decker looked at the chronometer mounted beside the helm. As far as he could tell, it was ticking the seconds off at a normal pace. At least, that was how it looked from where he was sitting. Who could say if a gravimetric distortion would affect their perception of the passage of time.

"Hull temperature?" he asked Hasselmann.

"Four hundred and fifty Celsius and rising." Hasselmann's eye fell on a flashing warning light near his left hand, which he immediately reached over to flip the acknowledging switch. "Herr Kommodore! The port warp nacelle indicates a weakened H-frame in the support pylon! Very much more stress of this sort and it may buckle!"

"Christ, it never rains...." Decker muttered. "Auxiliary power to number six shield!"

"Jawohl, Herr Kommodore!" Hasselmann hastened to make the power transfer as Decker leaned forward in his chair.

"Veltanoa, get ready on Isengard," he ordered tensely. "Stand by....and....*let 'er go!*"

He watched one of the side monitors on the bridge, which showed a view astern of the *Constellation*. The second container flew out of the shuttlecraft hangar and tumbled toward the star, lost to view in an instant in the fiery golden glare. The star receded, falling away on the port side, but not at all quickly enough for anyone's liking.

"Isengard's away!" Veltanoa crowed. "Readying Udûn!"

"Zhour, kick it! Samuels, break! Hasselmann, get a damage control team down to that pylon and shore it up! We'll drop to impulse while they get that licked." Decker half-turned to his right. "Talk to me, Masada."

"Isengard is falling in," Masada said. "Gravimetric drag is reducing....no change in time lapse."

Decker nodded and drew his already damp sleeve across his mouth. "So far, so good. If we can just - "

"Sir," T'Prea interrupted, "urgent call for you from sick bay."

"Put 'em on. Report, Dr. Jol."

"Sir, Starlife indicates many of the crew are feeling the effects of heat exhaustion," Jol responded.

"I could've told him that," Zhou panted.

"Most of the affected personnel are in the outer zones of the ship," Jol continued. "I strongly suggest all hands move inboard wherever possible."

Decker caught the pleading look from Zhou, who was puffing as he faced him. He regarded Samuels and Marlowe, both of whom breathed heavily, sweat stains widening across their backs. And there were still six containers to get rid of.

"T'Prea, tell Commander Edgerton to stand by in the auxiliary control room," he ordered. "You and Masada stay with me on the bridge. Everybody else, report to auxiliary control. And stay cool, people. We'll make it through this."

"Like hell we will," Samuels muttered under his breath as he hauled himself up out of the bridge well and back to the turbolift. He threw his arm around Zhou, who was unsteady on his feet as he got up, gulping hard and exhaling with exertion.

Decker scratched the side of his head and felt the dampness at his hairline. The heat on the bridge struck him as comparable to the heat that the instrument panels and weapons had radiated when the Organians truncated the war, when Trefayne came aboard to warn him that he must undertake this mission to begin with. He caught himself oddly wondering if it was also comparable to the heat in which Vulcan men found themselves at the peak of their mating cycle.

For his own part, Jim Kirk had found out about Vulcan mating cycles the hard way and would never forget the lesson. Since he'd faked his death to satisfy Spock's bloodlust, encountered a Greek god, had another near-fatal run-in with the bloodthirsty gas creature from Tycho IV, been mistaken for a father figure by an ancient Earth probe, met Spock's parents during a sensitive diplomatic mission, and nearly been trapped in a parallel universe, life on the *Enterprise* had more or less returned to normal: at least, according to the ship's, and Kirk's, definition of the word. Spock was his old imperturbable self again, but McCoy, if Kirk knew him, would take all of about fifteen minutes to find some new minor discomfort to overstress.

Returning to his quarters from a personal training session with a security officer who was an expert in martial arts, Kirk had just finished changing his clothes and plopped down at his desk to relax when the intercom whistled. No rest for a weary starship captain. He nodded his head a moment, leaned over and hit the button. "Kirk here."

"Bridge here, Captain." It was the lightly accented voice of Clara Palmer, the relief communications officer covering Uhura's leave after the parallel-universe thing. "Encrypted transmission from Starfleet Operations incoming, coded captain's eyes only."

"In my quarters, Lieutenant," Kirk instructed. He turned on his monitor screen and pressed the decoder switch beside it, frowning at the text that appeared.

CONFIDENTIAL - EYES ONLY

STARDATE: 4102.2

FROM: COMMANDER STARFLEET OPERATIONS SECTOR 15

TO: COMMANDING OFFICER U.S.S. ENTERPRISE (NCC-1701)

PRIORITY: SEARCH AND RESCUE

SUBJECT: STARSHIP MISSING IN ACTION IN AREA

ENTERPRISE WILL DIVERT IMMEDIATELY TO SECTOR L-300. U.S.S. CONSTELLATION (NCC-1017) UNDER COMMAND COMMDR. M.R. DECKER LAST KNOWN TO BE OPERATING IN THAT AREA HAS FAILED TO RESPOND TO REPEATED SUBSPACE TRANSMISSIONS. CONSTELLATION HAS BEEN REPORTED OFF COURSE AND OFF MISSION AS OF STARDATE 4014.5 1100 HOURS LOCAL. SEEK OUT AND ASCERTAIN CONSTELLATION'S CONDITION AND MOUNT A RESCUE OPERATION IF NECESSARY. IF HOSTILE FORCES ARE ENCOUNTERED, ASSESS SITUATION AND CALL FOR REINFORCEMENTS.

AUTHORIZED SIGNATURE

CAPT. A.V. BRETTON SFC-UFP

STARFLEET OPERATIONS

CONFIDENTIAL

Kirk read the message a second time and then looked contemplatively across the room. Sounded like just the sort of risk he was accustomed to taking - but since when had Matt Decker ever deviated from a mission assignment? Something must be seriously wrong out there. He leaned back over to the comm panel. "Kirk to bridge."

"Bridge, Spock here."

"Mr. Spock, we've received new orders. Alter course for sector L-300; one of our starships is missing and possibly disabled. Issue a security alert to all decks and place rescue and damage-control parties on standby."

"Acknowledged."

"Kirk out." He read the message on his monitor screen one more time and rubbed his jaw. "All right, Matt, what's going on out there?" he muttered. "You're not the kind of captain to take your ship for an unauthorized joy ride. Unless you've been driven mad by some unearthly affliction...."

On the *Constellation*, racing in mad, headlong oblongs around M-427 and its nearest planets, the temperature had risen to nearly 40 degrees. Despite all efforts to cool the ship down between passes, the hull continued to retain more and more heat with each pass. Almost two hours had elapsed since the first pass and it already felt like almost a day - and it very well might have been, if there had been any undetectable gravimetric effects. After the fourth pass, Hasselmann and a new contingent of deck hands relieved Veltanoa and his group, who promptly sought refuge in sick bay. Even their environmental suits were struggling to regulate their core temperature.

The star itself was reacting as the refined magnotritium nitrate plunged into it and burst on impact. So far, there was no instability Masada could detect, and no hazardous reactions along the lines of a coronal mass ejection or an electromagnetic storm. Yet it lent credence to Masada's assertion that they were best off dropping each container one at a time, lest the star be unable to digest the refined substance all at once and immolate its entire system and the *Constellation* with it.

Masada himself sagged over his console, puffing like a dog: on the last pass, he'd been determined to ask if Decker intended to let the intense heat weaken the structural integrity any worse than it already had. If he could just seize some regulatory opening to table this wild endeavor, maybe get Edgerton to threaten Decker with relief, before it got the ship destroyed. However, by the middle of that pass, it was all he could do just to stay on his feet and mind the sensors to make sure the ship didn't burn up completely.

Decker, meanwhile, had little luck relieving the fierce itch in the middle of his back, aggravated by perspiration as it was. The turbolift hissed open, and Galbraith hurried out, carrying three stainless-steel flasks. Even her face glistened with perpetual sweat.

"Fresh water from ship's stores, sir," she said as she passed two flasks to Decker and Masada. "Medical orders from Dr. Jol."

"Oh, thanks, Laurie." Decker nodded gratefully and pounded down a swig: Masada could offer no such terms of gratitude.

"T'Prea?" Galbraith said, proffering the third flask.

The young Vulcan woman showed no ill effects whatsoever as she turned and looked up, making no move to accept the flask. "Thank you, Lauren. It is exceedingly rare for the temperature aboard ship to emulate that of my home planet." She turned back to her console and touched her ear antenna. "Sir, Mr. Hasselmann is ready to release Cirith Ungol."

"Get me auxiliary control," Decker said. "Richard, how you doing down there?"

"All that's missing is a bit of surf and sand," Edgerton replied jocularly. "But I'll settle for an Alpine resort."

"Three more passes and we're there," Decker told him. "Bring us around!"

"Reversing course!" Edgerton strode around behind Samuels and leaned on the auxiliary control console between him and the engineer. "Hold your breath, everyone," he said. "Anybody for a cold Boddington's in the officers' lounge when this is over?"

"I'll settle for Aldebaran iced tea," Samuels said. Relocating from the bridge had made his job a great deal easier, but he was starting to question whether he'd make it through three more passes. "That's if we aren't all ashes and cinders by that time."

"I'm starting to think Masada had a spot of bother following through," Edgerton muttered.

"We're now heading one seven five mark eight," Marlowe said, half to Edgerton and half to the communications speaker. "Bridge, I recommend we release Cirith Ungol in the middle of our next turn. I'm plotting another loop around the second planet to try and release some of this heat."

"Very well," Decker said. "Hasselmann, did you catch that?"

"Ja, Herr Kommodore," Hasselmann answered. "Moving Cirith Ungol as close as we dare to the hangar doors."

"All right, you've got...how long, Masada?"

There was no response. Decker looked over at the science station to see Masada leaning over it, chest heaving, head shaking slowly.

"Mr. Masada!" he snapped.

Masada gasped and looked up. "Sorry, sir," he said, heaving himself to his feet and over the sensor viewer. "Sixteen seconds....to periapsis." He bent over, chest still heaving and head still bobbing.

Decker blew out a heavy breath of his own. "You'd better get yourself to sick bay, fella," he warned.

Masada's head switched from bobbing to shaking. "I'll make it through this one, sir. Just - " Suddenly he flattened his hands on his console and stared into the viewer. "Solar flare off our starboard bow! Range eight hundred thousand! Its altitude is already higher than ours and it's still climbing!"

"Dodge it, Danny, dodge it!" Decker yelled into the speaker.

"Up and over!" A newfound burst of energy permeated Samuels's voice as he wrenched on the attitude controls. "Hold onto your heels, gang!"

The *Constellation* lurched and pitched sharply upward, taking on a heading to soar over the flare. But such unpredictable bursts of solar weather are a force of nature no human reflex can possibly outmatch. The flare spewed from the surface of the star at a far greater velocity than Danny Samuels, Pete Brent, or even Erica Ortegas could hope to best. All Samuels had for it was to haul off to port and away from the apex of the flare, veering to its left: yet still the star found time to scorch the starboard side of the *Constellation's* primary hull near the bow.

Decker wiped his drenched forehead and gasped in another breath as the flare dropped away to the right side of the screen. He leaned over the speaker.

"All right, Hasselmann. Give Cirith Ungol the heave-ho....*now!*"

He barely heard Hasselmann's shout over the intercom: "Cirith Ungol, *los!*"

The container was halfway out of the hangar when Marlowe exhorted Samuels to pitch and change course. In two directions at once, the *Constellation* skewed away from the incendiary arch, letting the container tumble end over end out of the hangar - almost immediately the flare burst high enough to consume it, as if the star was ready and desiring of its explosive morsel. Without waiting for orders, Samuels increased speed and powered away along the course Marlowe had laid in for the second planet.

"Ungol away, Herr Kommodore!" Hasselmann exulted. "All we have left are Gorgoroth und Dol Guldur!"

Two more passes. Maybe they could get away with taking an extended breather and booting the last two containers simultaneously. Decker stood up and wiped his palms on his hips, one of the only regions of his body not already marinated in sweat.

"How long until - " he started, but a heavy thud to one side of him interrupted. He shot a look sideways to see Masada doubled over his console, collapsing into his chair, hyperventilating.

"Mr. Masada!" Galbraith cried. She dashed over to him and pushed him back in his chair, gasping at the sight of his pale, sopping face.

"That's it, he's had it," Decker snapped. "Help me - help me get him on the lift!" He fought off an attack of dizziness as he pulled Masada out of his chair and slung the science officer's arm over his shoulders. The best assistance Galbraith, who was nearly a foot shorter than either man,

could offer was to hold his other arm as they struggled to manhandle him toward the turbolift.

"Tell sick bay to get a team to the turbolift yesterday!" Decker grunted at T'Prea. "Laurie, as soon as they take him, get back up here - we might need you." He none too gently lowered Masada to the deck in the turbolift and then sagged against the bulkhead beside it.

"Sir, are you - " Galbraith hesitated in the doorway, eyeing him with a concerned face.

"I'll be all right. Go!" Decker waved her on and turned, staggering back to the science station. He dropped into the chair, wheezing, and reached for the comm panel. "Auxiliary control....slow to impulse. We've *got* to vent some of this heat....before the next pass."

"Aye, sir," Edgerton answered. "Are you all right up there? Do you need some relief?"

"Just do it. I'll call you if I need you." Decker shut the speaker off and hung over the console. "Tell you what, T'Prea....it's lucky for you you're used to this kind of heat." He took another gulp from his water flask and sat heavily back in the chair.

"We will need relief on the sensors, sir," T'Prea pointed out. "However, at last report, Lieutenant McCreedie was experiencing symptoms of dehydration."

"Well, I reckon I'll just...." Decker trailed off and gave her a sidelong look. "How much did you familiarize Galbraith with the communication systems when you were investigating Dorian?"

"As extensively as necessary to determine the frequency of his activity and the level of encryption he was using."

"So she knows the basics, at least. If you feel up to handling the sensors, you two might as well switch places when she gets back up here."

"You do seem to place an inordinate amount of faith in her abilities, sir," T'Prea said matter-of-factly.

"Galbraith's a hell of a smart girl, T'Prea. The thing is she's not very good at showing it because of her neurological condition. You're familiar with it, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. It's what's commonly known in the Federation psychological databanks as autism. The brain structure is actually relatively typical in Vulcans, but it is true that while Ms. Galbraith is not very sociable, she is extraordinarily intelligent by human standards."

"Well, just a couple of centuries ago, those same facets would have more than likely gotten her locked up in a mental institution or worse, murdered by her own parents. I hate to tell you this, but even to this day, humans can be real sons of bitches about things they don't understand. Times I wonder why the Vulcans who detected Zefram Cochrane in flight even bothered to drop in."

"We believed your civilization was ready to step forward into a newer and better era, to usher in a world that people such as Lieutenant Galbraith were intelligent and skilled enough to create," T'Prea said, turning back to her station to flip through the comm channels. "I would be interested in learning more of her genetic background; she exhibits a much more logical thought process than most of the humans aboard ship. I find it quite refreshing."

"You think she's got some Vulcan in her?"

"It does cause one to wonder if Vulcan cultural observers paid a clandestine visit to Earth shortly before autistic humans were initially identified."

"Now that's a scary thought," Decker remarked. He glanced at the scanner panel before him at the same moment as the turbolift doors hissed open.

"If you want my opinion, sir...." Galbraith's voice from the turbolift was steeped in anxiety. "This thought is even scarier."

As much as Galbraith's tone, instinct stiffened Decker's guard. He turned and only saw her petrified expression for a split second before he saw Dorian holding a phaser to the back of her head.

Chapter 12

"*Verdammt!*" Hasselmann cursed to himself as he examined the last container's status display. "In sechs Minuten sterben wir!"

Until now, the containers had been flashing orange and white lights to indicate the status of the stasis fields, but the container designated Dol Guldur had started flashing all its lights red, rapidly, and in unison. Dread overwhelmed Hasselmann. There was no way to tell exactly what that meant, but he could take a good guess that it meant nothing good. He pounded the communicator button on his helmet. "Bridge, this is the hangar deck. We have a serious problem here!"

There was no response. Hasselmann repeated his hail, shot a desperate look at the winking, glaring display lights, and switched channels. "Hasselmann to auxiliary control!"

Even if Hasselmann could have reached the bridge just then, there would have been no eliciting a response: not when any attempt by either Decker or T'Prea to reply would result in Galbraith's head being phased off.

"Dorian, you scheming bastard," Decker growled as he got slowly to his feet. "This is dry rot even by your standards. Disobeying orders, brig break, threatening a junior officer - I'd ask what you have in mind for your *next* court-martial offense, but I don't want to give you any ideas."

"Technically it wasn't brig break," Dorian said obtusely. "Not since you ordered all hands to move inboard from the outer areas of the ship. Currier was so busy scratching his crotch by then, it was too easy to knock him on his ass." Galbraith grimaced in disgust.

"But to answer your question," Dorian went on, "I'd say mutiny should work."

"Mutiny?" Decker ogled him in disbelief. "That only works if the entire crew is in on it, not just one arrogant ass with a phaser and a hostage!"

"Oh, you think it's just me, do you?" Dorian smiled faintly. "Think again. You know, there was a time when they hanged mutineers from the yardarms of sailing ships. But let's face it, in our case, the warp nacelles simply aren't long enough for that."

T'Prea had slowly risen from her chair, standing within arm's length of both Galbraith and Dorian, but the stocky, dark-visaged man caught her in a peripheral stare. "Keep your hands to yourself, T'Prea. Whether this thing's set to stun or kill is for me to know and for you to wonder about. But if you try and give me a pinch, my reflex action won't make much difference at this range."

"Whatever you're attempting, Mr. Dorian," T'Prea replied, "logic is not on -"

"Oh, don't start that 'logic is not on your side' bullshit with me again," Dorian snapped. "Promised myself I'd transfer you if you brought it up one more time."

There was a pause. Decker and Dorian held each other's unblinking glares. T'Prea stood very motionless by her station. Galbraith trembled, eyes closed, waiting for an abrupt scorch at the back of her head that would be the last thing she'd ever feel.

At length, Decker tossed up his hands. "So now what? You wouldn't be holding Galbraith at phaser point and threatening a mutiny if you didn't have something you wanted to coerce from me."

"For one thing, you aren't even aware of half the damage and casualties this ship has suffered during this insane flyby. For another thing, in case the heat's affected your memory, that old fart from Organia warned you that an even worse power of destruction was headed our way and I'll bet you a king's ransom that it did those solar systems in. Don't you think it'd be prudent to have a significant tactical advantage handy in case we run into it?"

"Are you even listening to yourself? What the hell kind of advantage could we be holding if it *is* more powerful than what we're dumping right now?"

Dorian did not retreat. "There's an extreme threat to the Federation out there, Commodore. There's a section in the Starfleet Charter that authorizes us to take extraordinary measures to deal with it. Now are you trying to tell me our payload doesn't qualify, that you'd just as soon see this whole galaxy shattered one system at a time?"

Decker bared his teeth. "There's an extreme threat to the Federation right here on my goddamn ship, Dorian. And you can follow me to the gates of hell and damnation itself if you think I'm letting some damn fool bureaucrat grab it and hide it in some weapons depot!"

"Oh, you mean you're going to let poor little Laurie here die for your ass-backwards quest?" Dorian shook his head in mock dismay. "And here I was just about to raise a point about playing favorites with your junior officers."

"Please don't bait him, sir," Galbraith entreated Decker, her sweat-glistening face frozen in fear. "Please? I don't want to die!"

"In that case, Lauren...." T'Prea said softly. "Please forgive me, my friend."

Before either Dorian or Decker understood her intentions, she reached up and quickly pinched Galbraith on the neck.

Galbraith burst out a short, strangled cry of surprise, but she immediately crumpled out of Dorian's line of fire. In a fit of anger, Dorian backhanded T'Prea with his phaser-wielding hand: though she could easily absorb the blow, the logical course of action was to drop to the deck, out of the way, and let Decker take care of this.

For Decker had already reacted and Decker meant to knock Dorian's lights out. He grabbed the chair from the science station and hurled it at

Dorian, who had only just rebounded from striking T'Prea when the chair hit him squarely in the face and chest. He bellowed and dropped the phaser, staggering sideways.

Decker moved in on him, jumping to one side of the prostrate Galbraith and launching a double jab at Dorian's chin. He brought his other fist around for a hook, but Dorian furiously blocked it and replied with a right cross. Decker blocked the punch in like manner and feinted a right cross of his own, only to bring his knee up to ram into Dorian's abdomen. His rage burgeoning with each successive blow, Dorian dropped back against the communications console and rebounded again with a two-fisted jab against Decker's chest.

Now it was Decker's turn to stagger and recoil, but he caught himself on the railing encircling the well of the bridge, braced himself, and lashed out with both feet against Dorian's breastbone. Dorian stumbled backwards into the opening turbolift doors, but he caught himself on both sides of the doorway and hurled himself back at Decker, bowling him over and bringing both of them tumbling into a collapsing pile on the deck in the bridge well. Decker barely had a chance to raise a knee along with both fists to absorb Dorian's tackle and fling him off to one side. Almost immediately both men scrambled back to their feet and faced each other, sneering, fists raised, each of them awaiting the other's next strike.

By now it was clear that the two men were evenly matched. Still lying prone under the communications console, T'Prea watched them, unable to predict the outcome of the fight logically: but then she chanced to look down and see Dorian's phaser lying easily within reach. She grabbed it in the same instant as Dorian grabbed the arm of the command chair and spun it clockwise. He leaped onto the cushions, surged over the back of the chair, and pounced on Decker again, driving him back toward the helm console: Decker had no recourse but to elbow him in the side and cross him squarely in the mouth. Dorian reeled, knocking over the navigator's chair, but catching it at the last moment and preparing to bring it around in an arc even more damaging than the first blow Decker had dealt him.

Now or never. T'Prea hoisted herself halfway up, braced on one knee, and blasted Dorian with the phaser. She hadn't bothered to check its setting, but she couldn't deny feeling a tinge of relief as a stun bolt enveloped Dorian and sent him slumping over the navigation console.

Decker heaved a deep sigh, sagged back against the helm, and nodded. "Nice work, T'Prea."

Relief, however faint, gave way to distaste. "With all due respect, Commodore, I shall never fathom the human male proclivity to use physical violence to resolve differences," T'Prea commented as she powered the phaser down and removed the energy unit from the handgrip. "I find the illogic of it excessive to the point of intolerable." She moved to lift the still-unconscious Galbraith up into the communications chair.

"Can't argue with that." Decker crossed the well and hauled himself up to the science station. "Auxiliary control, report."

"We're....we're approaching apoapsis and circling the second planet," Edgerton sounded bemused. "But sir, didn't you receive Hasselmann's warning?"

"We got a little distracted up here - " Decker broke off as T'Prea bent over her console and pressed her ear antenna.

"Urgent message from Lieutenant Hasselmann, sir!" she exclaimed. "Dol Guldur's stasis field has short-circuited due to the high temperature! He expects the field to fail in less than two minutes!"

Decker shook his head heavily. "Just what we need. Switch him over!" He dropped into the well and hit his communication button. "Decker to Hasselmann. Report!"

"We're going to lose Dol Guldur in a minute und forty-seven seconds!" Hasselmann's voice sounded like steel dragging on concrete. "When it's exposed to this much heat, there's no way to predict its combustion point!"

"What are your orders, Commodore?" Edgerton's voice had a strange, almost condescending, undertone.

"Take us in," Decker replied. "Warp two. We'll heave 'em both at the same time! Hasselmann, reposition Dol Guldur to drop first!"

"Jawohl, Herr Kommodore!" Hasselmann grabbed an anti-grav grapple of his own to lend a hand to his crewmen as they shuffled the order of the last two containers.

T'Prea, meanwhile, bounded to the science station and peered into the viewer. She had only a rudimentary understanding of how to interpret the readings thanks to her science rotation, but the ability to interpret came naturally thanks to her race. She turned the knob on the side of the viewer, zeroed in on the star, and reported: "Eighty-five million kilometers and closing, sir. At our present speed, we will reach periapsis in thirty-five seconds. That gives us a window of twenty to jettison!"

"Finally something goes right around here," Decker growled. "Get ready down there, Hasselmann. As soon as I give the word, ditch 'em just as quick as you can!"

"Only too happily!" Hasselmann muttered. His crewmen had just finished moving the container designated Gorgoroth across the hangar and away from the doors, as the other two moved Dol Guldur further aft. The warning lights flashed with such malevolent intensity that he kept expecting the explosion to spark prematurely, to begin right on that very panel of warning lights.

The lights flashed. The star blazed. The *Constellation* barreled closer and closer to it. Decker poised between his chair and the bridge railing.

Time stopped.

He held his breath as the star dropped toward the bottom edge of the viewer. There was nothing, no word, no warning, from the hangar bay or auxiliary control. The heat climbed higher than anything he'd felt before: the ship began to shake and the lights began to flicker. One more pass, he knew, was all they could afford to make, or the *Constellation* would surely shake apart under the massive gravimetric forces as it drew near the star if it didn't burn up first.

"Periapsis in twelve seconds!" Time began to pass again at T'Prea's report. Ten seconds came and went: as she counted down, Decker leaned over the speaker on his chair.

"...zero!" T'Prea exclaimed.

"Now, Hasselmann, give it the toss!" Decker hollered.

There was no reply from below. He looked, flabbergasted, at the speaker, but it stayed tauntingly silent.

"Periapsis plus five," T'Prea warned.

"Decker to Hasselmann! Toss those containers, *now!*"

Still no reply.

"Periapsis plus ten!" T'Prea sounded more urgent than ever.

"Decker to auxiliary control! I've lost contact with Hasselmann! Tell him to unload before they blow!"

Still nothing.

"I believe communications have malfunctioned, sir," T'Prea said gravely. "It is in Mr. Hasselmann's hands now."

The same conclusion bore down upon Hasselmann as one of his crewmen looked desperately over at him, nodding at the wildly flashing warning-light panel. "Sir, I don't think we can wait for orders from up above any longer!"

"Agreed." Hasselmann nodded resolutely. "Dol Guldur, *los!*"

The two crewmen handling Dol Guldur clapped it in their anti-grav manipulators and heaved it mightily off the deck. Stomping the soles of their feet like sauro-pods they hauled on toward the threshold, and heaved the great vessel of death and destruction out of the doorway, not bothering to disengage: the manipulators were expendable, as they would later agree. The container tumbled out of the doorway and off to keelside of the *Constellation* as the star sucked it greedily in.

"Nächstes auf die Scheissliste," Hasselmann muttered to himself. "Sauder, Buslovich! Ready on Gorgoroth?"

"Ready on Gorgoroth, sir!" Sauder replied.

"Gorgoroth, *los!*" Hasselmann bellowed, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. He flung himself to the deck and scrambled out of the container's path, as Sauder and Buslovich bore it on aft. As they reached the threshold of the hangar doors, Buslovich heaved on his manipulator almost too late and stumbled: the tether about his waist could barely withstand the jolt of the combined mass of his body and the container before his grip broke. Gorgoroth spun its way out of the hangar in almost the same instant as Dol Guldur detonated.

Only the *Constellation's* velocity kept it ahead of the shock wave. But Gorgoroth was not so lucky. Released just a few seconds after Dol Guldur, it spun into the wave head-on: anyone viewing the explosion of the two containers from distantly enough might have sworn by the effulgence of the blast that M-427 achieved temporary status as a binary star system. The *Constellation* powered on away, but the dual concussions pursued it hotly until the combined shock slammed into the ship low on the starboard side. The engineering section took most of the impact, loosening some of the plating around the starboard nacelle.

The force of the blast hurled Decker forward, stumbling over the inert Dorian and sprawling across the helm. T'Prea tried to catch herself on the railing, but her inertia was already such that she missed and landed flat on the deck. Galbraith, still unconscious from T'Prea's nerve pinch, ended up right where she'd been afterward, but her sudden crash on the deck brought her around. Disoriented and shaken, she found herself sliding uncontrollably across the deck, cried out wordlessly with confusion and panic, flailed about to grab one of the stanchions supporting the railing. No sooner had she achieved a purchase than the *Constellation* abruptly yawed nearly fifty degrees to starboard and veered away from the star.

Bracing himself on the console, Decker pushed back into the helmsman's seat and cursed under his breath as he looked at the chronometer. The stars were sweeping across the viewer in dizzying, flashing circular lines from the upper right to lower left corner - the ship was spinning out of control. He tried to engage braking thrust, to no avail; Samuels had transferred all helm control down below. He became conscious of Galbraith's distressed, gasping cries, looked over and saw her hunkering under the science console, wailing without a word and repeatedly slapping both sides of her head. He scrambled underneath the railing and crouched in front of her.

"Lieutenant!" he exhorted her forcefully. He shook her by the shoulders, but it made matters no better - she looked on the verge of a personal implosion, alternately slapping her temples one second and slapping them simultaneously the next, caterwauling her distress all the while.

"Lieutenant Galbraith, snap to!" Decker barked. "That's an *order!*"

"Commodore!" T'Prea had quite suddenly appeared beside him and grabbed Galbraith by the wrist. "She is in a state of severe overstimulation and cannot respond. Please allow me." Without waiting for his permission, she pressed her hand flat against the side of Galbraith's head, closed her eyes, and breathed deeply.

"There is fear," she said in a quiet but firm voice. "I feel it as you feel it. It pervades the ship, everywhere....but the danger is past, it is *past.*"

Galbraith's cries died down to heavy, whimpering breathing. T'Prea pressed her fingertips hard into the young human woman's temple. "The ship is *out of danger,*" she persisted. "Our mission is *complete.* There is nothing to fear, Lauren. We still live. The ship....is *safe.*"

"I wish that were a hundred percent the case," Decker interjected. "But we're in a goddamned time warp and I need communications with auxiliary control before we end up like the *Discovery!*"

"We will handle it, sir," T'Prea pledged as she lowered her hand from Galbraith's head.

Still breathing shakily, Galbraith rubbed her eyes and offered a short, spastic nod. "If we - if we reroute the secondary bridge circuit through the navigational relay, is that likely to open us up a speaking tube?" she offered. To look at her, Decker, much to his incredulity, never would have guessed that she'd been on the verge of a mental nervous breakdown just a few moments ago.

T'Prea nodded consideringly. "Archaic terminology, but an intriguing suggestion. It will be necessary to cross-circuit the subspace direction finder to the internal distributor."

"I don't think *he's* going to go nuts over that," Galbraith muttered, nodding at Dorian.

"Forget about that bearskin rug," Decker said, reaching for Dorian's phaser. "Get to work, ladies. I'll deal with him when he comes around."

"Very well, sir." T'Prea guided Galbraith to the access panel under the communications console and popped it open. "I wish to renew my apologies for the nerve attack, but in order to defuse Mr. Dorian's sedition - "

"Don't worry about it. You pulled me out of the worst meltdown I've had in years. Which, by the way, how did you carry that off?"

"Pass me the distribution microchip," T'Prea said, motioning. "Are you familiar with the Vulcan mind-melding technique?"

"I've heard of it. Is that what that was?"

"Indeed. Many of us are reserved about using it with offworlders, but as you have discovered, it can be important for such purposes as placing a pacifying suggestion into an agitated mind." T'Prea plucked two wires from the microchip and gave one to Galbraith. "Disconnect the subspace direction finder from its filament and attach this to the lead."

"Okay. I was pretty overwhelmed, what with Dorian and all the shaking around and the noise...."

"Your reaction was fairly inevitable for a human with your neurological structure. But there are certain Vulcan mental disciplines that, were you interested in learning them, would aid you in avoiding such episodes in the future."

Galbraith cocked her head as she crimped on the attachment from the microchip to the direction finder. "Can we talk about it some more later?"

"If I was capable of enjoyment," T'Prea said as she attached the microchip to a power source, "I believe I would experience it."

"Okay. I think that should about do it." Galbraith closed the access panel as T'Prea stood up and hooked in the internal channel.

"Bridge to auxiliary control," she hailed. "Commander Edgerton, please respond."

"Edgerton here. Blimey, we were starting to wonder if anyone was still alive up there!"

"We're not quite dead yet," Decker answered. "Listen, Richard, we're right where I didn't want to end up - in a time distortion. Get us on a straight course and hit the brakes!"

By hand and foot he anchored himself to the command chair as he watched the chronometer and waited. The *Constellation* heaved forward again, the shivering thrum of the engines dropped sharply in pitch. The arc of spinning stars on the main viewer slowed drastically, the ship shook like a mountain in an earthquake: Galbraith braced herself at the side of the communications console, T'Prea clung to the edge. The drop in momentum sent the unconscious Dorian rolling into the support bracket of the helm and navigation consoles, but unconscious he didn't remain for long thereafter.

As the ship ceased shaking, rattling, and tossing about, Dorian began stirring. Decker picked up the phaser from the seat cushion beside him and held it languidly in one hand, waiting for him to come fully to consciousness.

In auxiliary control, all eyes were on the viewing screen as the star field slowed to a full stop. Edgerton stood up straight and felt the deck under his feet - no vibration. He looked at the velocity indicator - no momentum. He checked the engineering console - no output.

"Did we make it?" Samuels ventured.

"We sure did. We're out of the gorge!" Marlowe exhaled heavily as she reached over to grab his hand, grinning with exultation.

"*Yes!*" Samuels exclaimed. He clapped his other hand over Marlowe's, joining her in a hearty, relieved laugh - but almost at once they instinctively let go as the intercom before them whistled.

"Bridge to auxiliary control," Decker's voice had resumed its accustomed authoritarian growl. "Ship's chronometer shows that we lost about two weeks in that time distortion. Get me a position report and a preliminary damage report. We'll resume course for those destroyed solar systems after we've taken care of the main damage and the casualties."

"Aye, aye, sir," Edgerton answered darkly, glaring daggers at the speaker.

Samuels gazed at the console before him and shook his head. "Can't even stop to catch our breath, can we?"

"And I was just beginning to think Masada was wrong about him," Edgerton scoffed.

"You were wrong about one thing," Decker told Dorian, who had hauled himself up into the navigator's seat, leaning sideways across the console. "Actually, you were wrong about a lot of things. But this mission was anything except 'ass-backwards', as you so insubordinately put it, and don't give me any guff about the cargo falling into the wrong hands. When it could have caused devastation enough to flatten the entire surface of a planet, there damn well aren't any *right* hands."

"I bet you wouldn't be talking all lofty and moralistic if the Klingons had snatched it up and were on their way to Vulcan with it already," Dorian grumbled.

"Well, we'll never know, will we? Not now that my 'ass-backwards' mission is completed and we're hauling 'ass-forwards' on to the next thing."

"And when you come within sight of whoever or whatever reduced all those solar systems to space dust, what do you intend to do then, now that you've done away with our only tactical advantage?"

Decker's eyes narrowed to an aperture that could have cut straight through Dorian's neck if they were capable of emitting light. "Who the hell do you think you are, Dorian?" the commodore demanded. "You threaten to kill one of my officers, you threaten a one-man mutiny on my ship, you evoke interplanetary war and you think you can talk to me like you're the Chief of Starfleet Security and I'm some snot-nosed plebe. Well, let me tell you this, mister - I don't give a flying rat's ass if you *are* the Chief of Starfleet Security, or Intelligence, or the goddamned Men in Black." He motioned at the scanning station on the starboard side of the bridge. "When we find whatever's out there blowing my planets apart, you're going to sit right there where I can keep an eye on you, and you're gonna watch while I put a stop to it."

'Look ahead!' called Gandalf. 'The Bridge is near. It is dangerous and narrow.'

Suddenly Frodo saw before him a black chasm. At the end of the hall the floor vanished and fell to an unknown depth. The outer door could only be reached by a slender bridge of stone, without kerb or rail, that spanned the chasm with one curving spring of fifty feet. It was an ancient defence of the Dwarves against any enemy that might capture the First Hall and the outer passages. They could only pass across it in single file. At the brink Gandalf halted and the others came up in a pack behind.

'Lead the way, Gimli!' he said. 'Pippin and Merry next. Straight on, and up the stair beyond the door!'

Arrows fell among them. One struck Frodo and sprang back. Another pierced Gandalf's hat and stuck there like a black feather. Frodo looked behind. Beyond the fire he saw swarming black figures: there seemed to be hundreds of orcs. They brandished spears and scimitars which shone red as blood in the firelight. Doom, doom rolled the drum-beats, growing louder and louder, doom, doom.

For the next two days Decker found he could no more take rest in his quarters, reading further on in *The Lord of the Rings*, than he could lay off drinking coffee for a week. The preliminary damage and casualty reports were sobering enough, but the full reports, as they came in, were altogether depressing. The star's reactions to consuming the magnotritium nitrate - to the beat of several solar flares, prominences, and coronal mass ejections - had rattled the *Constellation's* hull plating, weakening its structural integrity by fifteen percent: the high gravitational forces plus the heat had warped the support pylon of the port nacelle almost irreparably. Even making temporary repairs necessitated a day and a half of cruising at full impulse power, but still Veltanoa determined that the ship's maximum velocity would be reduced to warp 3 until a starbase could render a more thorough refit. And that temporary repair job amounted only to the engineering crew who were available, excluding those still recovering from high-temperature illnesses.

Only the climate controls in the sick bay had kept Dr. Jol and his staff reasonably functional since the mission began. Still, after nearly two days of treating those who were worst off, all Jol wanted was to visit the ship's botanical garden and relax among the flora. For now he had to settle for sitting in his office, eyes closed, resting his weary mind for a few moments, reflecting on the unfathomable burdens of the medical profession, until he'd recovered enough energy to return his attention to the weak and the sick. His internship on Bolias had scarcely prepared him for the seemingly infinite scope of the health care needs of other races.

When next he opened his eyes, there stood Edgerton next to his desk, staring at the Starlife monitor. Jol stood up and turned to look with him, eyeing the many warm colors of the system's unsettling readings.

"How's Buslovich?" Edgerton asked.

"I got the internal bleeding stopped, and managed to realign his lower ribs, but the connecting tissue is damaged and needs a few days to regenerate," Jol said, stifling a yawn. "On the brighter side of things, I've managed to return two-thirds of the most affected personnel to duty, including Commander Masada. But at this point, you can see what all hands are laboring under."

"Mmm," Edgerton nodded. "And the commodore?"

"I'm half surprised he took my advice to get some rest. After the way that mission went, I thought for sure I'd have to give him medical orders."

"About that..." Edgerton looked furtively toward the doorway to the examination room to be sure no one was eavesdropping. "We barely had the cargo unloaded when he ordered the ship about to return to the destroyed solar systems we ran into the day before. I'm not sure I like the direction he's leading us in, Doctor. If he places the ship in critical danger, then as first officer, I may have to take action and I'll likely need your involvement."

Jol cast a troubled glance at his desktop. "In what way?"

"In establishing grounds to relieve him based on his mental state."

"I was wondering if anyone else noticed something off," Jol nodded slowly. "It's been what, over three years since he took command of this ship and I've never seen him push it this hard. Intense heat has been known to wreak havoc on a man's cerebral cortex."

Edgerton frowned thoughtfully. "I have a feeling this far preempts heat-related illness. Are you familiar with the concept of the one-track mind, Doctor?"

"Ah, you mean 'ospla-ombas'? That's the Bolian term for it. Yes, it's a common psychological condition across all sapient races. And I think I see what you're getting at - Commodore Decker is, in perpetuity, a man with a mission, whatever he perceives it to be."

"Even if it overrules or even ignores the mission parameters set forth in our original orders." Edgerton's tone was as grim as his expression.

"Think of it," Jol said, looking away. "The bridge of a ship is its brain. Every system is controlled from it, every station reports to it. If the bridge should be damaged or broken, then so is the linkage that keeps every function of the ship connected and working. A man's brain isn't far different - you remember what happened with Irene Cornwell on Doradus? Her brain was traumatically injured, and she ended up blowing that whole affair wide open for us. The brain is the bridge, and if it's damaged, the rest of the body starts to lose cohesion."

"Are you suggesting Commodore Decker suffered some sort of neurological trauma during Operation Orodruin and he's declined to let you in on it?" Edgerton's frown deepened.

"Like you posited, there may be more to it than the heat. But whether neurological or psychological, he's been through something. If I knew what it was, if I knew just what was driving him like this, it might help my professional judgment."

"Maybe that's it. Remember how he lost his wife just before he took this assignment? His wife was Maria Trask, the exobiologist. She was famous for her love of nature and for her work adapting extraterrestrial flora to the environments of other planets. If anything's driving the commodore, it's his grief, his resolve to shield any planet he lays eyes on from being destroyed, for the sake of her memory."

"I'd been hearing her name ever since Boliias joined the Federation. And grief is one of the most powerful negative emotions anyone will ever feel. I tell you, Richard, I envy the Vulcans being able to suppress feelings even as intense as that. But that to-do with Lady Cornwell can't have helped his state of mind any."

"If we do find out what's behind all this destruction, I have some very real concerns about the harm's way he's likely to take us into."

"Then you joined Starfleet why, again?"

A chill ran down Edgerton's spine as he heard Decker's voice from uncomfortably close by. He and Jol both turned to see the commodore standing by the doorway to the examination room, scowling at them. He hadn't shaved, and Jol didn't like the nearly infinitesimal diameter of his pupils. He remained silent, quietly sizing Decker up as Edgerton handled the exchange.

"Well, sir," Edgerton began carefully, "you did say when we left Earth that there was a lot of galaxy to explore."

"*And* a lot of planets to defend." As Decker stepped forward, Jol studied the increased pallor of his complexion in the changing shades of light. "And as anyone who's joined this crew in the past three and a half years very well knows, maintaining life and the safety of Federation planets is its one duty to carry out and hold above all else. You gentlemen might be interested to know that we've just returned to the sector where we came upon what was left of some of those planets, which means our job now is to prevent any more of them from coming to harm. Not to go running around the ship with phasers and hostages threatening mutiny."

"May I ask what your intentions are if and when we discover the cause?" Edgerton inquired.

"My intention is to put a stop to whatever that cause may be." Decker's tone was simple, but it had a double edge. "And to do that, I need my senior officers to stop questioning either my orders or my motivation for giving them, not to mention perseverating over my personal tragedies." He glowered meaningfully at Jol, who had been summing up the unkempt state of both his cranial and facial hair along with his unusually irritable deportment.

"Sir, for what it's worth, no one aside from Dorian has seen fit to question your character," Jol offered. "But what worries me right now is the amount of strain you're taking on. One would think protecting Federation space is your sole personal responsibility."

Decker stared awls at him and shook his head. "Don't start with me again, Doctor. I won't waste another day laid up in my quarters while another solar system gets laid waste. And when we find the leading end of this debris field, I'm going to need all hands on deck. That's your primary duty."

Jol was about to beg to differ, saying that an essential facet of his duty was to assure the safety of the ship by monitoring the commanding officer's health and wellness, but the intercom whistled before he had the chance. Masada's urgent call for Decker from the bridge drew the commodore to the communication screen on the desk, yet he held Jol in his peripheral vision to make sure he didn't move in on him with a hypospray.

"Decker here. Did you manage to get through to Starfleet yet?"

"Not yet, sir," Masada answered. "But I think you'd better report to the bridge. We're approaching the L-374 system, and from here it looks like the fourth planet is being broken to pieces."

Decker's eyes flashed with resolve as he looked up at Edgerton and Jol, neither of whom looked particularly sanguine about this development. "Very well, Toshiro, head for that planet," he ordered. "I'll be right there." He shut off the monitor and began to move toward the exit. "All right, men, we know what our job is, so let's get about it. Dr. Jol, get every crewman who's fit for duty on his feet. Mr. Edgerton, be on the

bridge in five minutes with a report on our battle readiness. If we're about to find out what's been wreaking havoc on this sector, damned if I'm letting it pass."

Chapter 13

Legolas turned and set an arrow to the string, though it was a long shot for his small bow. He drew, but his hand fell, and the arrow slipped to the ground. He gave a cry of dismay and fear. Two great trolls appeared, they bore great slabs of stone, and flung them down to serve as gangways over the fire. But it was not the trolls that had filled the Elf with terror. The ranks of the orcs had opened, and they crowded away, as if they themselves were afraid. Something was coming up behind them. What it was could not be seen: it was like a great shadow, in the middle of which was a dark form, of man-shape maybe, yet greater; and a power and terror seemed to be in it and to go before it.

It came to the edge of the fire and the light faded as if a cloud had bent over it. Then with a rush it leaped across the fissure. The flames roared up to greet it, and wreathed about it; and a black smoke swirled in the air. Its streaming mane kindled, and blazed behind it. In its right hand was a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire; in its left it held a whip of many thongs.

'Ai! ai!' wailed Legolas. 'A Balrog! A Balrog is come!'

Gimli stared with wide eyes. 'Durin's Bane!' he cried, and letting his hood fall he covered his face.

'A Balrog,' muttered Gandalf. 'Now I understand.' He faltered and leaned heavily on his staff. 'What evil fortune! And I am already weary.'

Captain's log, Stardate 4202.1. Exceptionally heavy subspace interference still prevents our contacting Starfleet to inform them of the destroyed solar systems we have encountered. We are now entering System L-374. Science Officer Masada reports the fourth planet seems to be breaking up. We are going to investigate.

"ETA at fourth planet?" Decker said, leaning forward in his chair.

"Eight minutes, present speed," Marlowe answered.

"Sensors are showing a massive amount of energy surrounding the entire planet," Masada reported. "Penetrating it, in fact. It reads as highly concentrated anti-proton - the density of it is off the scale."

"Didn't you say you were reading anti-proton traces on that space rubble we passed by earlier?" Decker queried.

"Yes, sir. But if whatever this is is capable of tearing entire planets to bits with a concentrated anti-proton beam, I wouldn't think much of our chances against a weapon as potent as that."

"I agree, sir," Veltanoa joined in. "With only eighty-five percent hull integrity, we would be in a bad spot if we approach the source of that energy beam too closely."

"Thank you, gentlemen, your concern is noted," Decker said. "Allowing for the fact that we don't even know what it is we're approaching. Masada, how many planets did this system originally consist of?"

"Six, sir. Two of them had lunar systems of their own." Masada looked into his sensor viewer again and refocused. "I'm picking up an unidentified object above the planet. Very dense, metallic....too large to be any kind of vessel we're familiar with. But it's got to be our culprit."

The warning beacon on the helm began to flash insistently, as if to confirm Masada's exhort. Samuels squinted into his navigation viewer, but the viewscreen still showed nothing but space rubble and asteroids.

"Is it within visual range?" Decker demanded.

"Almost," Samuels replied.

"Whatever it is...." Masada peered closer. His hands flattened on the science console, and he came within millimeters of striking his head on the viewer. "Good God. It just sheared off the entire north pole of that planet!"

"Increase to - " Decker broke off in frustration. Acceleration was the first and only recourse that sprang to mind, but the *Constellation's* acutely hampered warp capability steamrolled that and every other possible action he could take. "Veltanoa, can't we pour on any more coal?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Veltanoa tossed up a paw. "If we even attempt warp three point eight for longer than a few minutes, the port plasma conduit will blow us into the next galaxy."

"Damn it. Steady as you go, Danny." Decker sat back restlessly in his chair, arm slung over its back, and fingered his computer disks two-handed.

Another two minutes and Marlowe bent over her display. "We're within visual range now, sir," she announced.

Decker sat tensely up straight. "On screen."

First the planet appeared - or what was left of it. True to Masada's report, the north pole had been torn completely off and now drifted slowly away into space - only to disintegrate in a sudden, rending, splattering burst. Without being told, Marlowe increased the magnification on the screen to zero in on the cloud of rubble as it dissipated.

And beyond the rubble, the answer: and with the answer, a new prevailing question.

"What....in the hell....is that?"

All that registered with Decker was Dorian's question, not the fact that the would-be mutineer had risen to his feet. Yet as he so often had over the last three years, Dorian spoke the minds of everyone on the bridge - even Seppala, who had been standing guard over him since the first attempt to contact Starfleet.

The view on the screen now enraptured all hands: a gigantic, cone-shaped, evil-looking metallic *thing*, something that by all appearances had not been part of that planet, something never before seen or known by the furthest-reaching explorers. Its exterior was bluish gray, but the gaping maw at its wide end became clearly visible as the fragments of the planet's north pole scattered before it. The interior glowed a hellish flaming red, and in the center of it, the source of the incredible heat - a glaring, blinding energy field, blazing and scorching and flaring like an exploding sun.

It angled toward the largest remaining section of the planet and shot a solid yellow beam of anti-matter energy into the rocky, drifting mass. At once the mass split apart, into two smaller chunks, drifting in opposite directions until the huge device fired on each chunk and smashed them to even smaller pieces.

"That's what we've been looking for," Decker said distantly, turning to glare at Dorian. "And unless you want to find out what that force beam tastes like, I suggest you park your ass and don't interfere." He turned to Masada. "What is that, a ship? A space life form of some kind?"

Absently, Masada turned to his sensor viewer. "Hard to tell, sir. I can't get any readings on its power source or its guidance system. But between those blasts...." He looked at the main viewer again just as the menacing-looking object hurled another energy beam at the largest remaining section of the planet. This time the beam penetrated the core, the molten ball disintegrated in a great blinding flash of fire and liquefied metal: before a dozen pairs of disbelieving eyes, the massive slab of what had once been a planet's northern hemisphere shattered into a hundred million shards of crushed stone.

Masada exhaled, quailed by the distressing sight, and refocused the sensors. "That's an anti-matter energy field it's using to generate that disintegration beam," he said. "No way to tell what's powering the field - but I can tell what happens next. It's absorbing the debris from that planet, almost like it's eating it."

"What in bloody 'ell for?" Edgerton wondered from behind Decker.

"Whatever it's up to, chow time is over," Decker resolved. "T'Prea, sound red alert and open up a hailing frequency." He exchanged four-letter looks with Dorian as T'Prea executed orders that would otherwise have been Dorian's to receive. The alert siren howled: T'Prea reported the frequency open.

"Unidentified vessel, this is Commodore Matthew Decker of the Federation starship *Constellation*. Cease fire on that planet at once!"

Nothing. The gargantuan device unleashed another disintegration beam and distended two more large segments of the planet. Marlowe looked in wonder at Samuels, whose uncomprehending shock was apparent as they both silently questioned what the object was or where it might have come from.

"No reply, sir," T'Prea said.

"Subspace interference?"

"Still present, but the vessel has made no discernible attempt to respond."

"Try a short carrier-wave transmission. Maybe that's all they're capable of reading."

"Old-style radio? What in hell good do you think that's going to do?" Dorian said cynically.

"You tell me," Decker shot back. "For all we know, this thing was drawn here by those encrypted transmissions you used to give our position away. So either give me the frequency you used, or sit down and shut up!"

"If it were me, I'd go with option two," Seppala advised Dorian, glaring at him coolly. In those dark almond eyes, Dorian could see her poring over the score of means in which she'd been trained to kill or maim him with her bare hands. Section 31 had trained him for internal espionage, not hand-to-hand combat: he could physically match Decker, but there could be only one way to find out if he could take a professional fighter like Seppala. He slowly sat, turning his attention back to the carnage on the viewing screen.

Decker nodded his approval to Seppala and leaned back to the speaker. "Unidentified vessel attacking planet four of solar system L-374, this is Commodore Matthew Decker of the Federation starship *Constellation*. Break off your attack. You're asking for trouble. Respond or be fired upon!"

The thing's only response was to alter its attitude slightly upward. As it changed angle, the rubble reacted - unknown mega-tons of it began to drift toward the machine, jostling into a row, being sucked by some unidentifiable tractor force into the wide open end of the monstrous device.

"It's a berserker!" Dorian said suddenly.

"A what, now?" Masada asked.

"Christ, am I the only one around here who can read?" Dorian scoffed. "Berserkers are a concept from old-time science fiction - automated weapons of mass destruction that roam around destroying all organic life they encounter. 'Chaotic Evil' is what twenty-first-century gamers would have called them. You'll never talk that thing down, Commodore. It could be as old or older than some of those stories, old enough that even if it was manned, no one's left alive on it."

"Then how do you propose we get through to it, Mr. Head of Communications?" Seppala asked with a twinge of sarcasm.

There was a pause - for once, Dorian had no answer, not even a comeback. Decker, however, leaned forward and clutched one hand around his computer disks.

"Let's fuck around and find out," he said crisply. "Ready main phaser banks! Lock on and stand by to fire!"

Working in rapid tandem, Zhou and Samuels had the phasers ready for action in less time than it took Decker to issue the order. Eyeing his navigation sensor, Samuels called out the range: for all the space the berserker took up on the viewscreen, it was still thousands of kilometers beyond effective range of the phasers. It still hovered in the midst of the debris field, drawing in the scattered, smashed aggregates that had once comprised the fourth planet.

"Ninety thousand kilometers!" Samuels sang out.

"Fire!" Decker shouted.

Samuels pounded the emitter switch with the same enthusiasm as he so often engaged the warp drive. The phaser beams flashed across the viewscreen yet took several seconds to reach their target before the blinking ricochets could be seen, starkly illustrating the infernal device's incomprehensible size at its extreme distance from the *Constellation*.

Samuels fired again. The beams lanced across space, struck home, bounced back. The berserker didn't react, didn't change course, didn't even yaw.

"No effect from phasers, sir!" Zhou said.

"Lock on its ass end," Decker said. "It could be vulnerable there."

"Aye, sir," Samuels said. "Standing by!"

"Fire!"

Blasting and blasting again, the *Constellation* charged at the berserker. The range was extreme, yet the machine's mass so phenomenal that there was no missing even its narrow end. Still, the machine's only reaction was one of casual irritation. It pitched slightly, began to turn and undulated toward the *Constellation*, gobbling up still more rubble as it went.

"Full phasers and still no result!" Zhou tossed up a hand helplessly.

"All right, Masada, what gives?" Decker demanded. "Because its hull sure as hell doesn't!"

"That's because it's solid neutronium, sir," Masada replied. "It's a partially collapsed, extremely dense metal formed in the cores of neutron stars. A cubic inch of it literally weighs a ton. You could hit it with a thermonuclear missile and not even scratch it!"

"Well, there's got to be *something*," Decker said determinedly. "Helmsman, come left to course two nine five mark three, bring us within sight of its mouth but not directly ahead. And maintain maximum range, I don't want to take a hit point-blank. Stand by photon torpedoes!"

"Yes, sir!" Samuels heaved over on the helm controls as Decker sat rigidly up in his chair, watching the viewer. The *Constellation* and its foe turned on each other, circling like a pair of prize fighters squaring off in a ring, one vessel jockeying for position and the other seeming to wait at guard for the next blow to be struck.

"Torpedoes locked and loaded!" Zhou announced.

"Fire!" Decker barked.

The torpedoes rocketed into view in a moment, but their exhaust trails were lost to sight almost immediately against the berserker's roasting interior. They impacted the lower inside in a nearly straight line, but their points of impact were little more than puffs of fire that left not even a mark on that impenetrable mass of neutron metal. And then the weapon chose this moment to respond: it slanted upward, changed course slightly, lumbered straight toward the *Constellation*, filling more and more of the viewer with each closing second.

"I think we pissed it off," Samuels said nervously.

It wasn't a wisecrack so much as an understatement. The already glaring energy field could be seen to brighten, the infernal machine could be seen to accelerate.

"Christ," Decker muttered. "Evasive action, Danny! Warp one!"

"Warp drive's not responding, sir!" Samuels cried.

"Veer off - " Decker hadn't the chance to order a course when the blinding anti-matter beam spurted from the berserker's maw and slammed into the *Constellation* almost head-on. The impact was like nothing any of the crew, on any ship, in any region of space, had felt before.

Marlowe screamed as she was hurled out of her seat and flat on the deck. Seppala landed on her back adjacent, Edgerton was pitched into the turbolift. The *Constellation* heaved so violently to port that the planet killer's next blast landed low on the starboard engineering section, dinting the shields so deeply as to leave a smoldering scorch mark on the hull. The crashes and blows were horrendous. The environmental engineering console burst in a flurry of firelight and sparks, and several lighting panels nearly blew out as well.

"All decks, report damage!" Decker yelled as he heaved himself back into his chair.

"Starboard deflector one is buckled," Zhou puffed. "Also the outer hull of the engineering section, starboard warp nacelle and decks fifteen and sixteen!"

"Hull also compromised on decks four and five, sections B-twenty through D-eleven," T'Prea added, pressing her ear antenna.

"Veltanoa, what the hell happened to my warp drive?" Decker demanded.

"Analyzing now...." Veltanoa sought to get his respiration under control as he bent over the engineering console. "We're losing potency in the antimatter pods, sir! Something is sapping all the energy, that berserker or whatever it is must be somehow dampening all the energy sources in its vicinity!"

"It's the neutronium hull," Masada said. "Metal that dense produces an extremely powerful electromagnetic field, and no need to tell you what that can do to our power sources. The subspace interference can be laid to it as well."

"Must also be how that thing detects planets to target," Edgerton surmised, leaning on the railing behind Decker.

"Well, Commodore...." Dorian wore a sardonic half-grin as he knelt on his chair and leaned over its back. "I bet now you wish you hadn't already tossed the one tactical advantage we could have taken over that thing."

Decker whirled on him, his face dark with rage. "You shut your goddamned mouth, Dorian, or I swear I'll personally boot your ass right into that anti-matter field!" he snarled. "Helmsman, get us back on course! Stand by all phaser banks!"

"Sir, we already know the phasers won't do a ruddy bit of good!" Edgerton protested.

"We'll see about that," Decker snapped. "Helmsman, draw us back out to maximum range. Set phasers for continuous barrage!"

"Aye, sir," Samuels said in a muted tone. He looked worriedly over at Marlowe, who appeared a bit dazed as she returned to her station. But a quick shake of her head, a bend over her display and she was herself again.

"Masada, what's that sucker up to?" Decker asked.

"Continuing on its original course - and it's literally sucking," Masada said. "At the rate it's going, it'll have consumed that entire planet in less than a day!"

"I shudder to think what it could do to us," Edgerton said. "Sir, we should withdraw and call for reinforcements - "

"Nothing doing! That monstrosity is *not* getting past us to smash up any more solar systems!" Decker shook an emphatic finger at Edgerton. "Helm, relative position to the thing!"

"Eighty thousand kilometers, dead astern!" Marlowe replied.

"Hard about! Put a phaser barrage right down its throat!"

"Phasers ready, sir," Samuels nodded.

"*Fire!*"

Samuels punched the switch and held it. The machine swung into view, took up the entire middle of the screen, took up still more as the phasers shot a prolonged salvo directly into the energy field. The range closed, Samuels maintained fire: yet still no signs that the phasers were having any effect.

Again the weapon counterfired. Again the *Constellation's* forward shields and primary hull absorbed most of the blow, with much of the hull plating around the starboard bow being either incinerated or ripped away. Again the ship staggered; and again Decker ordered Samuels to wrench it back on course and resume phaser fire.

In engineering, technicians were still rushing around trying to straighten things up from the planet killer's counterattack, when the entire deck began to vibrate with the heightening roar of the phaser power converters. Hasselmann's head vibrated at almost the same cycle. He rushed over to the antimatter pods to recheck the power level - or what remained of it.

"Ach, *scheisse!*" he snapped to himself. He ran back for the control console and punched the communication switch. "Engineering to bridge! We're still losing power in the antimatter chambers, and the phasers are draining us faster yet!"

"Commodore, *please*, we've *got* to break off this attack and haul off before we lose all power!" Edgerton urged.

"Negative!" Decker spat. "Maintain phaser fire, Danny! Damn it, *keep firing!*"

"Sir, at this rate of fire, we'll have drained the phasers in - " Veltanoa never got the chance to finish his warning. The *Constellation* rocked madly as the planet killer, unfazed by the comparatively tiny starship's assault, cut loose again and knocked the ship off course. Two of the lighting panels on the port side of the bridge burst, and Zhou narrowly avoided being blinded as he was pitched away from the weapons console. Edgerton, similarly, hurtled across the bridge and fell across the communications station.

Still another impact pitched the *Constellation* backward. Decker heard an urgent but indistinct yell over the intercom as his chair spun itself clockwise and threw him to the deck aft. Edgerton flew off his feet, bowling T'Prea over, and Dorian ended up right alongside Masada, who had almost torn his sensor viewer loose from the panel trying to anchor himself.

"Whaddya say to some extraordinary measures?" Dorian grunted.

"Hell, for a threat this extreme, I don't think there *is* such a thing!" Masada turned and caught Edgerton's gaze as the first officer sat up and started to pull himself up on the communications console. Masada widened his eyes meaningfully. Edgerton nodded, pulled himself to his feet and punched a pair of switches on the communication panel as he pushed away from it.

"We've lost starboard deflectors!" Veltanoa hollered as he staggered back to his station. "Main energizer is - " Again a massive, atrocious crash of fire interrupted him. This time there was no mistaking the eldritch crackling of tearing, crumpling hull alloy from back aft. The *Constellation* pitched violently and yawed to port: no one on the bridge was left standing or sitting upright.

Samuels could be heard to exclaim what could have been either a curse or a prayer. By the time he had started to struggle back upright, he found Decker already on his feet, leaning over the helm, evening out the *Constellation's* attitude - and reestablishing a phaser lock. The phasers were still in full barrage mode. Decker reopened fire, trying to aim past the machine's energy field and hit whatever was back there powering it, but the field brightened all over again. This blast sent the *Constellation* spinning out of control to starboard, crushing and rending metal, inducing the hair-raising staccato sounds of groaning and cracking from a hull that had never been designed to withstand such punishment.

Veltanoa uttered something in Occotoan Vacotian that the universal translator couldn't, or wouldn't, process. "Sir, that last hit tore out about five thousand cubic meters of the primary hull! Decks four through eight, sections A-one through E-twenty-six. Right where that solar flare hit us the other day!"

"Bridge! *Brücke!*" Hasselmann's yell over the intercom came through in a third language Veltanoa didn't recognize.

"Bridge here, go ahead, Jost!" he answered.

"The starboard warp coil failed, mein Herr! The nacelle is venting plasma!"

"Viewer astern!" Decker snapped. Flustered and fearful, Marlowe fumbled with the screen controls for a moment, but presently she had the rear view, staticky and line-swept as it was, enabled. And no one even noticed the static as they gaped in disbelief at the condition of the ship's afterworks. The starboard nacelle was half gone, plasma spewing from it in all directions: the port one was mostly intact, but had been badly scorched.

"Jesus H. Christ," Decker grunted. "Shut down the warp core, Hasselmann! *Do it now!*"

"Sofort, Herr Kommodore!" Hasselmann answered. For the unimaginably long seconds it took him to comply, it seemed as though what was left of the starboard nacelle must surely explode, and the port nacelle right alongside it, and then the entire engineering section and the rest of the ship. But the shower of plasma from the starboard nacelle dissipated - and not a moment too soon: the port plasma conduit had just begun to vent.

Stars swept across the viewer as the *Constellation* spun wildly sideways. And then the berserker swept across the screen with them, lumbering straight toward the crippled, hapless ship. Light filled its maw just as it vanished from view. The beam struck a glancing blow on the aft port edge of the primary hull, narrowly missing the impulse thrusters, but doing far worse damage to the port nacelle's Bussard collector, and skewing the nacelle with a force that buckled the support pylon. Another few seconds would surely have seen the port plasma conduit rupture, vent, and explode.

"That's done it, sir," Veltanoa said with a heavy sigh. "Our warp drive is completely gone."

"What's left?" Decker asked, wiping perspiration from his face.

"We can still maneuver on impulse, but we're losing main power to that thing's magnetic field. If we don't break off now, we'll lose everything!"

"If we break off now, another fifteen billion people are going to die!" Decker retorted. "Danny, ready a full spread of photon torpedoes!"

"Can't get a lock, sir!" Samuels answered plaintively.

"Then fire as you bear! Zhou, get me all the phaser juice you've got left!"

"Commodore!" Edgerton dropped into the well and grabbed Decker by the arm, interposing himself between his commanding officer and the viewing screen. "Sir, we have *got* to haul off. We can't take any more fire from that bloody thing!"

Decker shook his head vehemently. "No. No, *no*. We're not doing this right now, Edgerton. Make yourself useful, get below and take charge of damage control."

Edgerton looked past him as the turbolift opened. Out strode Jol, looking overstimulated and perturbed. Edgerton could only imagine the miracles he'd been trying to perform in sick bay for the past couple of hours. He came over and stood beside Edgerton, joining him in staring penetratingly at Decker.

"I choose to make myself useful in other ways, sir," Edgerton said.

"Now what the hell is this about?" Decker demanded, glancing at Jol.

"I was asked up here by Commander Edgerton, sir," Jol answered. "To provide my professional assessment, pursuant to relieving you of command for psychological cause."

"Relieving - " Decker repeated in disbelief. "In the middle of a battle?!"

"You've been placing unbearable pressure on yourself in the past few months, sir, and this engagement is bringing it to a head," Jol said firmly. The bright blue of his skin tone had begun to darken to purple.

"Oh, for the love of God, Jol, we've been through this!"

"We aren't even halfway across the bridge, Commodore!" Jol snapped, leaning on the railing. "You've been laboring under severe negative emotions for years, and your psychological condition is directly proportional to the condition of this ship. Now you've placed the safety of all hands in dire jeopardy, and under Starfleet Order One-oh-four, Section C, it's my prerogative as chief medical officer to authorize your relief by the next senior officer!"

Decker clapped a hand to the side of his head. "I don't believe this. We don't have time for this nonsense! How many lives do you two think are at stake here?!"

"Right now, sir?" Jol said. "Four hundred and thirteen. We lost the other seventeen in the five separate hull breaches the ship has suffered already."

Edgerton looked up at Seppala, who stood at one of the openings in the railing, staring blankly at the three men. Her gaze flicked from Edgerton to Decker, and back to Edgerton again. Her hands were folded behind her back, her phaser plainly in view: there was no telling whose side she would end up taking. Behind her, however, Dorian was also watching Decker with the narrow-eyed beginnings of a smirk.

"Either we withdraw, sir, or the bridge is no longer yours," Edgerton said steadily. "And there is *no* middle ground."

The sputtering, arcing control consoles on both sides of the bridge embodied the cracking tension between Decker and his senior officers. He also looked toward Seppala, but her loyalties were as inscrutable to him as they were to Edgerton. Behind the first officer, Samuels had been watching the confrontation with a side eye, but now cast an opposite side eye at Marlowe, who looked downright terrified. In all self-honesty, Samuels, too, felt baffled and even scared, not understanding what was happening right before his eyes.

"No middle ground, huh?" Decker scoffed. "Isn't that what everyone used to say on the eve of World War Three?"

"Yes, indeed, and we all know how that went," Edgerton riposted. He inhaled, preparing to add that even the old United Kingdom had taken no willing part in that madness, when a blast more ferocious, more devastating than anything to which the *Constellation* had yet been subjected sent the ship heaving sideways.

No one had anticipated the attack: all attention had been on the standoff between the senior officers, and now no one remained upright. The deafening impact pushed the ship into a savage, uncontrollable barrel roll. Masada was thrown headfirst into a display screen at his station, which shattered and surrounded his head with a halo of sparking electricity. He slumped unconscious under the console. The shaking and crunching carried on, and it was all Decker could do to push himself up and turn over. He looked up through the sparking, hanging cables and broken bulkhead plates to the translucent dome at the top of the bridge, just in time to see the unignorable mass of the planet killer passing overhead. That miserable thing had become the bane of his existence, but in the impossibly long time it took the weapon to pass them by, Decker suddenly felt a vibration coming in surges, accompanied by a disconcertingly loud crack.

And then in the same instant, he felt the crack, he heard it, and he saw it - in the port side of the dome.

"God damn!" he grunted. "*Clear the bridge! Out, get out, everybody out!*"

No matter anyone's level of daze, stun, or confusion, they all responded in a flash to that one prevailing, galvanic impulse - self-preservation. T'Prea and Veltanoa, nearest the turbolift, jumped for it: Zhou held the doors open as Decker bodily shoved Edgerton, Jol, Samuels, and Marlowe out of the well. Dorian had only just struggled back to his feet and seen Masada lying inert under the science console. But the cracking of the dome and the bridge bulkheads intensified: there was no time to see if his partner in covert operation was dead or alive. He stumbled aft and threw himself over the comm panel.

"Damn you, Dorian, get in here!" Decker yelled from the turbolift doorway. "What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm activating the emergency distress beacon!" Dorian answered. "At this rate, it'll be the only line of communication we have left!"

"There's no time, Dorian!" Seppala snapped. "We've got to get out - "

As she grabbed him by the shoulder, another horrible, earsplitting crack and a crunching of galvanized glass wracked the bridge. Edgerton and Zhou yanked Decker backward into the lift. An instant before the doors closed, the dome shattered, the air gusted, and the only other thing anyone could hear was Seppala screaming in shock before the evacuating air sucked her voice out with it: but the doors had closed before they saw her, Dorian, and Masada blown into space.

Chapter 14

There was dead silence in the turbolift. Not a sound but for anyone's breathing, becoming more labored as the eight people crowding the lift consumed what oxygen hadn't been sucked out before the doors closed.

"Jesus," Samuels whispered, staring between Zhou's antennae at the closed doors, the split second's function that had spared them all from being decompressed.

"I hope that was a prayer, Danny," Decker said softly. "Veltanoa, set it on manual and get us as close as you can to auxiliary control."

"Yes, sir." Veltanoa's acknowledgement was barely audible as he reached for the control panel.

"Everybody hold your breath," Jol instructed. "This is likely to take a bit longer than normal, and I don't want anyone asphyxiating before we get down there."

All hands inhaled at once, and Samuels tried not to cough as he drew in a lungful of oxygen mingled with carbon dioxide. Unable to count individual breaths due to the holding, it seemed to all of them like hours before the lift made it to the fifth deck. When it lurched to a halt, the doors opened so sluggishly that Decker and Zhou had to push them apart. A collective, grateful exhalation burst out into the corridor, which they quickly found a shambles of broken conduits, dangling cables, and flickering lighting panels. As they moved toward the auxiliary control room, the main illumination gave out, leaving only the dim, eerie glow of the emergency lamps to light the smoke-filled corridor.

"Veltanoa, what power have we got left?" Decker asked.

"With impulse drive on emergency, main power is flat and draining fast," Veltanoa answered. "Emergency reserves and life support are both working off the batteries."

"All right, lay to main engineering and scrounge up whatever you can." Veltanoa acknowledged, turned away and headed for a utility ladder.

"Is there any further need for me to be here?" Jol inquired, glancing at Edgerton as the remains of the bridge crew drew up in front of the auxiliary control room.

"Commodore?" Edgerton asked pointedly.

"No, I'd say that's settled, now that survival is our number one priority," Decker said. "You can return to sick bay, Doctor, and no more of this horse shit about relieving me of command at a time like this."

"Very well, sir." Jol turned away and headed for a corridor junction. Decker led on into auxiliary control, where Marlowe, Samuels, and Edgerton headed for positions around the main console.

"I hope you remembered to transfer helm control down here, Danny," Decker commented.

"First thing I thought of, sir," Samuels said confidently. "At least I didn't forget that part of the coxswain course."

"Hey, I reminded you and you know it," Marlowe told him.

T'Prea and Zhou made a beeline for the monitoring panels in the next room, but found the entry way blocked by a mess of broken conduits and loose wiring. Zhou muttered a curse in Andorian, T'Prea uttered a rebuke in Vulcan, and they backtracked to the corridor to use the rear entrance. Unable to obtain an exterior view on the screen, Edgerton arose momentarily and joined them.

Fists on his hips, Decker stared up at the overhead and sighed. He thought of the cold, empty, broken bridge, the three senior officers he'd lost up there. He hadn't really thought of either Dorian or Seppala as friends, but he and Masada had casually played three-dimensional chess often enough during downtime that he'd developed a respect for the late science officer's casually expressed intellect. Seppala's death scream, however, still rang in his head. A street fighter since childhood, she had doubtless hoped for her life to end in a fierce ground battle protecting her shipmates from an incursion, but hardly in a pitched mismatch between a starship and an alien chaos demon.

"Internal communications are shorted out," T'Prea cut off his reverie. "I was able to transmit a general distress call after the weapon disabled our warp drive, but we have no means to determine if it was received through the interference."

"Or the debris field, for that matter," Edgerton said, nodding at the screen. He'd just obtained an image, a picture of the asteroids drifting hither and yon outside the ship: and in the middle of the field, the planet killer, some thousands of kilometers from the *Constellation* and meandering along on a perpendicular course, gulping down still more of the devastation it had wrought.

Decker glared at his bane. What he wouldn't give to get his hands on whomever had created that wicked device and demand to know what the hell they'd been thinking, or if they even *were* thinking, letting their automated horror roam freely about the universe causing such havoc and hellfire as to swallow entire galaxies nearly whole.

"Any chance of using the debris field as cover?" Marlowe offered.

"Only as long as it lasts," Decker said. "Sooner or later that thing will devour everything that's left. T'Prea, pass me a communicator, willya?"

T'Prea withdrew a portable communicator from a drawer beneath the console and passed it through a gap in the blocked entrance. Still glaring at the screen, Decker hailed Veltanoa and moved over to stand behind Samuels. The berserker began to pass out of view: it no longer seemed as interested in the *Constellation* as in feasting on the rubble.

"Veltanoa here." The rasping growl was dark, defeated.

"How are we looking?" Decker inquired.

"Not good. The weapon sapped up all our antimatter energy, and main power will fail completely in an hour or so at this rate. We could divert auxiliary power to the impulse engines and maneuver out of the system, but we wouldn't get much further than that."

"What about the phasers, have we got enough if it comes to it?"

"Maybe for one more salvo," Veltanoa said doubtfully. "But right now, sir, the phasers are the least of our problems. Life support is down to bare minimum. Even accounting for casualties, we have only about twelve hours' worth of breathable air left on board."

Decker sickly lowered both the communicator and his head, sighing. Failing life support meant the one action he'd sworn to himself he'd never take as a starship captain. He looked over at Edgerton, who leaned against the grating in the monitoring room, a look of sober understanding in his eyes.

"Options?" Decker said, glancing about the room.

"Dispatch the shuttlecraft," Zhou offered. "See if one of them can break out of this solar system and escape the interference to send word to Starfleet."

T'Prea shook her head in dissent. "Illogical. Over the distance necessary to clear the interference, the life support systems of the shuttlecraft will not last much longer than those of the *Constellation*."

"We were supposed to pass near here on our original heading," Marlowe said. "This system still has three planets left. The third one is Class M, and it's inhabited only by nonsentient life forms."

"But what's to stop that oversized vacuum cleaner from smashing that one up next?" Samuels objected.

"The ship," Decker said quietly. "We'll evacuate to the planet, then set the ship's autopilot on a course out of the system with everything she's got left. The *Constellation's* brought us this far. If she can draw that bastard off....we should be able to hold out until reinforcements arrive. Logical enough for you, T'Prea?"

"Indeed, Commodore," T'Prea nodded. "Provided that the ship still has sufficient power to attract the weapon's attention."

"Then we'll have to save every milliwatt we can scrape up." Decker's mournful tone turned resolute as he lifted the communicator. "Veltanoa, divert emergency power to the transporter and get your people ready to evacuate."

He shut the communicator off and moved over to the grating. "Zhou, get to sickbay, have Dr. Jol transfer the wounded to the hangar bay and take charge of the evacuation down there. Get with Lieutenant Galbraith if you can find her, and have her load the cargo shuttlecraft with emergency rations and shelter materials." Zhou nodded and made haste to the corridor.

"T'Prea, Edgerton, pass the word to abandon ship," Decker went on. "See if you can track down Lieutenant Molinos and have her report to the transporter room to make sure we get all hands off the ship. Richard, you beam down with the first group. You'll be in charge on the planet's surface until I've seen everyone else off."

"Aye, aye, sir," Edgerton said slowly. "You will, of course, be joining us eventually?"

"Either that, or I'll do what every captain has to be ready to do and go down with the ship. And as you so antipathetically put it, there's no middle ground."

The *Constellation* hobbled among the asteroids like a dismembered foot soldier trying to reach friendly lines through a battlefield littered with military detritus. In the hangar bay, all of the most gravely wounded crew had been ensconced aboard personnel shuttlecraft as Zhou designated a command crew for each of the small vessels and Galbraith directed the provisioning of the cargo craft. Except for Hasselmann and a skeleton crew, the shambled engineering deck was empty: Veltanoa stood by in the transporter room, where Molinos waited with a full personnel roster and Edgerton conducted roll call.

More than once, Samuels could be heard to curse as an asteroid struck the ship, one he couldn't avoid as the ship no longer possessed the maneuvering capability to dodge it. Marlowe kept track of the ship's progress toward the third planet as Decker watched the screen, looking for some sign of his bane to reappear and ruin his entire stratagem.

Just a few hundred more kilometers....maybe a few more minutes.

"Just get us into transporter range, Danny," Decker instructed. "If we lay her into orbit, she won't have the power to break it again."

"Yes, sir," Samuels said. "Should be another three or four minutes at this rate."

"Let's just hope it's Class M enough to hold out on," Marlowe commented.

Samuels waved a dismissive hand. "Aah, don't worry about it, Tara, we'll be fine. We're not wearing red shirts, are we?"

"Yeah, but that didn't do Commander Masada any good, did it?"

"Well, would you rather stay aboard and suffocate?"

"You know, Danny, this is starting to sound like one of those 'twenty zillion questions' skits you and Ackerman used to do," Decker remarked.

"I don't know about that, sir. At least those were funny." Samuels stared fixedly at the viewing screen, thinking of the friend he'd lost during the *Constellation's* encounter with the Celestroid shortly before the Organian incident, and the friend sitting beside him he didn't want to lose now.

Decker's communicator beeped an incoming transmission at him. "Zhour here, sir. All shuttlecraft provisioned, manned, and ready to lift off, provided there's enough power to operate the hangar doors."

"Take what you need from the batteries," Decker told him. "When you reach the planet, try to find some shelter on the surface that's within transporter range, and give Commander Edgerton the coordinates. Safe travels, Mr. Zhour."

"Thank you, sir. Zhour out."

"Three minutes to maximum transporter range," Marlowe said.

"Damn it." Decker hung his head suddenly.

"What's wrong, sir?" Samuels ventured.

"Dorian was right after all. I shouldn't have heaved that magnotritium nitrate before investigating these blitzed solar systems. If we hung onto it, we could've formed a hell of a gauntlet and probably made a quick job of that weapon."

Samuels shot an unsettled look at Marlowe. Decker was not one to admit his mistakes to his junior officers, he was far more likely to deflect and distract. Marlowe inclined her head slightly and offered: "There was no way to know how things would turn out, sir. My great-grandfather used to say you can't make a wrong decision, you can only make a decision and then make it the right one, in some way."

"Well, your great-grandfather obviously wasn't a starship captain who had the power of life and death over four hundred people."

Marlowe smiled. "No, sir. Just four of them. He was the flight engineer on an attack ship during the Federation and Romulan War."

Decker shook his head. "Forget about it, Tara. How close are we?"

"Thirty-five thousand kilometers, sir. We should be in transporter range in less than a minute."

As they drew near the planet, Decker came alert, searching for some sign of his foe anywhere nearby. But the planet was intact, and intact it stayed. Samuels had little trouble drawing the *Constellation* to a halt - the poor old wreck was barely making headway to begin with. In the transporter room, Edgerton issued a final set of orders for all hands to be orderly and composed in disembarking, hoping to hell that he wasn't lying when he said there was no imminent threat of attack. It was then that Zhour called in, advising him of the chosen location to dig in and that the planet killer, at least for now, seemed to be keeping its distance.

"Zhour is establishing a base camp now," Edgerton informed Decker. "All hands standing by for transport."

Decker paused to sigh. No miracles, no *dei ex machina*, no alternatives left. It was time to accept the inevitable.

"All right, Mr. Edgerton, let's get it over with. Commence the evacuation."

"Aye, aye, sir. Good luck." Edgerton's tone was somber.

"Tara, lay in a course, one five seven mark four," Decker instructed. "Danny, set the autopilot to give it every kick she's got left. But let's hold her back here for now until everyone else beams down."

"Yes, sir." Samuels looked at Decker curiously. "If you don't mind me asking, when's the last time you had something to eat?"

"You got me. But it's not as if it matters with all the food processors shot to hell."

Edgerton's first order of business upon materializing was to check in with Jol on the wounded and his capacity to care for them. The four shuttlecraft had landed in a square formation, in the midst of which Jol, his technicians, and the shuttlecraft command crews were setting up a field hospital, reconfiguring the shuttlecraft's power systems to control the medical equipment. Edgerton next went in search of Zhour, who guided him about their surroundings: they were in an open field of windswept, low vegetation between a body of unidentified liquid and a very high, very steep cliff, over which the sun had begun to arc. The cliff was unscalable, and Edgerton vaguely recalled some literary reference to "The Cliffs of Insanity" that seemed strangely appropriate to this whole situation. As Zhour was pulling up tricorder readings of underground shelter at some distance, however, something else occurred to Edgerton.

"Where's Galbraith?" he asked, looking around.

"She's still on the ship, sir," Zhour said. "She took a casualty list to stand by and make sure nobody gets left behind."

"She should have left that to Molinos. I daresay the commodore wanted her down here to help distribute emergency supplies."

"Well, after the way Decker took us into two exceptionally dangerous missions in a row like he did, I certainly prefer being down here to being up there. My people are combative by nature, but there's a difference between combativity and reckless endangerment."

"Quite so." Edgerton turned to see another half-dozen crewmembers materializing near the shuttlecraft. "Ah, Hasselmann, just the man I

wanted to see. There's a communications booster array on board the *Newton*, if you would be so kind as to erect it by the shore of this lake."

Within an hour, the *Constellation* was almost completely deserted, the hangar bay clear and only one section of corridor occupied by crewmen waiting to beam down. The ship's power was fading fast - the instruments in auxiliary control were starting to blink out one at a time. Decker's communicator, at least, still worked, and demonstrated as much when Veltanoa hailed him from the transporter room.

"We're down to the last twenty-five personnel aboard, sir," he reported.

Something about the number seemed wrong to Decker, but he couldn't make a fuss about it right now. "Very well, proceed," he said. "We'll be down there in a minute." He looked at Marlowe and Samuels and made a doleful, resigned gesture. "All right, you two have done everything you can here. Time to shove off."

With an almost sentimental flourish, Samuels pressed two switches on the control console. "Autopilot is engaged, sir."

"Get to the transporter room. I've got one last log entry to make and jettison the buoy. I'll be right behind you."

"Aye, aye, sir." Samuels glanced at Marlowe, got up and led her to the corridor.

Decker waited until they were out of sight. He searched the viewing screen - no sign of the berserker. Almost furtively he disengaged the autopilot and began to lay in a new course.

Finding the turbolifts out of commission, Samuels and Marlowe had to descend a utility ladder the two decks to the transporter room. As he exited the ladder well, Samuels paused, turned, and waited for Marlowe to join him.

"Hey, Tara, listen," he said. "If we don't come through this, well...." He tossed up his hands. "Just want you to know, it's been a blast."

Then he grabbed her face in both hands and kissed her intensely.

Marlowe gasped in surprise, but then she clutched his shoulders and pulled herself closer to him, kissing him with almost as much passion. She'd thought for a couple of years that she was picking up a vibe of this sort from him, but Samuels was always too busy either flying the ship or being its clown laureate to take things much further. Long as it had taken him to act, it wasn't nearly long enough before he broke away.

"How long were you holding that back?" Marlowe breathed.

Samuels grinned wolfishly. "Three years, eight months, and an even number of days. Not counting the time warp."

Marlowe exhaled a deep breath and faintly smiled. She looked behind her at the ladder as Decker's footfalls echoed from up above. Then she grabbed Samuels by the hand.

"Hell with this!" she exclaimed. "We're gonna live!"

When they reached the transporter room, all that remained were Veltanoa, Molinos, T'Prea and Galbraith. Hard as they tried not to look like they had just been making out like a couple of teenagers on prom night, it suddenly became a good deal easier to pretend when Decker entered the room less than a minute later. The doors were now so underpowered that he had to sidle through.

"This everyone?" he asked.

Molinos held up a legipad and nodded. "The last of us, Commodore. All other personnel accounted for on the planet's surface."

Decker frowned at Galbraith. "What are you doing here, Laurie? You're supposed to be down there handling our emergency provisions."

"I - I'm sorry, sir, I - " Galbraith spastically waved a legipad of her own. "Dr. Jol gave me the casualty list, I just wanted to help make sure we didn't miss anyone."

She had relapsed into avoiding eye contact - more like the old Laurie Galbraith, the timid and nervous ensign who was petrified of interacting with senior officers. But this was no time to make an issue of it. Decker moved toward the console, tossing up his hands. "Well, now there's seven of us and six transporter pads. Get in the chamber, the lot of you. Has this thing got enough power for one more trip?"

"For six more people, yes, sir," Veltanoa nodded. "But for one more after that...I can't make any promises."

"And I can't ask. Guess it'll be up to me to find out. Prepare to beam down."

Samuels approached him from the other side of the console. "Hey, Commodore," he addressed him with informality bordering on disregard. "If we don't get out of this alive...."

Marlowe cringed.

"Been a pleasure serving with you, sir." Samuels held out his hand: Marlowe breathed easier.

"I doubt that's true, Danny, but thank you," Decker said as he shook the helmsman's hand. "And likewise. I've enjoyed serving with all of you as well, and that *is* the truth. Now stand by." He waited until Samuels occupied the last open transporter pad. He saw the younger man's nonchalant smile, he saw the impassion of T'Prea's countenance, he saw the sadness in Galbraith's eyes, and he wished in vain that he didn't have to do what he was about to do.

He activated the transporter, and pursed his lips as those last six of his crew energized like so much golden glitter. When the chamber was

clear, he shut down the console and dashed back out to the corridor.

Matt Decker was *not* going to leave his ship if he could help it.

The doors to auxiliary control opened only halfway and then quit. Scowling, Decker squeezed through, cursing under his breath, and sat at the console.

"All right, you big-mouthed son of a bitch," he growled. "Come and get me!" He coaxed the *Constellation* into a turn, and kept turning, as quickly as he could, until he saw the berserker again, thousands of kilometers across the debris field. Now it was just Decker, his ship, and his mortal enemy, and his ship was almost out of power and responding clumsily.

The communicator beeped, but he ignored it. He aimed the *Constellation* onto an interception course with the berserker at an obtuse angle of approach. He could hear the falling, lengthening pitch of the instruments, feel the lessening vibration. The *Constellation* was on its last breath.

The planet killer - Decker's Bane, as he'd irrepressibly come to think of it - was still ineluctably huge even at this long range, and a phaser lock was unnecessary. He pointed the ship toward it, rushed to the weapons console, and fired the phasers. The beams flickered weakly as they arced toward the monster and panged off its side: it began to turn, its red-hot interior seeming to glow even brighter with wrath.

Decker pitched the *Constellation* downward and changed course to port. The communicator beeped again, but he still ignored it and adjusted the heading to point the ship's bow away from the planet. Both the *Constellation* and the berserker were now about equal in maneuverability, but the berserker now had the edge in speed.

"Come on, baby, come on, just one more turn...." Decker urged. He crowded every milliwatt of power he could sop up into propulsion, but still the berserker turned faster than the *Constellation* could fly. Decker gritted his teeth and leaned on the controls as if his weight would be enough to add a few volts.

Then the energy field brightened.

The anti-proton beam slashed past the shattered bridge and ripped the exterior plating away from the port nacelle. The ship pitched viciously upward. As he tumbled off his feet, away from the console, Decker had only one last glimpse of his Bane stalking toward him before he landed on the deck against the starboard-side grating, his senses driven from him upon impact.

Several scouting parties had gone to investigate the shore of the lake and the hills around the encampment, searching out shelter, food sources and the potability of the lake's contents. Moving up the slope of the field toward the cliff, Samuels looked up into the sky - the clouds were fading, and the sun had begun its downward arc above the cliff. The vegetation and geology weren't precisely Earthlike, but the air was pleasantly temperate enough here. He looked around at the rest of the *Constellation's* crew, many of them huddled in small clutches, decompressing from the stress and terror of the battle.

"Nice planet," he remarked. "What'll we call it? Planet of the Scrapes?"

"I kind of like Babylon," Marlowe shrugged. "I bet we could hang a couple of gardens from that cliff face and grow some food."

"Only one thing worries me about this place, though."

"What's that?"

"We are feggin' *surrounded* by guys in red shirts."

They hastened to open the distance between them slightly as Edgerton approached them, looking concerned. "Samuels, where's the commodore?" he inquired.

"He was going to beam down right after us," Samuels frowned, looking behind him. "Isn't he here yet?"

"No one's seen him, and I can't seem to reach him on the communicator," Edgerton said. He looked down toward the communication booster array at the shore of the lake, which T'Prea and Hasselmann were working to configure in the hopes of cutting through the subspace interference to call for help.

Nearby, Galbraith flitted from spot to spot doling out ration packs and fresh water. As she laid out a flask and a couple of vials for the array crew, she glanced up and caught T'Prea's eye.

"Guess I should thank you again for that mind meld," she said amiably.

"How so?" T'Prea asked.

"I don't think I would've been able to keep my wits about me otherwise during the battle."

"Occasionally a mind meld does leave a residual effect with the subject, such as when a Vulcan who is near death transfers their *katra* to a living being."

"Do you think the commodore was upset with me for staying aboard?" Galbraith knew the question was non sequitur, but it would nag at her until someone answered it.

"The commodore had a great deal to concern him, naturally," T'Prea replied. "But it was logical of you to ascertain that all survivors had safely evacuated the ship. I am not capable of enjoyment, Lauren, but I am able to appreciate the workings of your mind. If we survive this situation, it would be interesting to see if a Vulcan academy of some discipline would admit an autistic human."

"As long as the other girls there are easier to get along with," Galbraith said with a nervous smile. "You weren't there to see how - " She broke off, her hand tightening around one of her vials. She pressed her other hand flat on the ground, and the nervousness shifted from her smile to her eyes as she looked aimlessly about. "Did you feel something?"

"I think you're asking the wrong person about feelings, Fräulein Galbraith," Hasselmann interjected with an amused look.

"Feel the ground, stupid!" Something told Galbraith that right now there would be no consequence to insulting a superior officer. She pressed both hands on the ground just in time to feel it again - a faint, pulsating tremor. Then she saw the ripples in her vials.

"Note the ripples on the lake," T'Prea said at almost the same moment. "I think it would behoove us to attempt to contact the ship."

Edgerton had already arrived at that very conclusion thanks to an alert seismologist who knew an earthquake when he felt one. Motioning for Zhou to follow him, he hurried down the slope from his command post.

"Sir, look!" Samuels stopped him and pointed into the sky above the top of the cliff. The clouds had dissipated, as had the sunlight as the sun passed beyond the cliff and alleviated blindness. Orbiting objects were clearly visible - and there it was, that most dreaded of orbiting objects, whose destructive force they had already witnessed: the unmistakable shape of the planet killer taking direct aim at their refuge.

"Jesus, it's coming back," Samuels gulped. "It's coming right for us!"

"Oh, my God," Marlowe's voice trembled as she hugged his arm.

Edgerton offered no such prayers or blasphemies. He bolted for the booster array and drew his communicator.

The instruments in the auxiliary control room were almost out of juice, their beeps and hums fading. Another insistent beep drowned them out. Groggily, Decker lifted his head as his communicator beeped again, and a third time. He groped about and grabbed it as he tried to reignite his brain.

"Decker here," he grunted, sitting up.

"Edgerton here, sir! Emergency! That bloody berserker's back, and it's opened fire! We've got to beam back aboard right away!"

"What the - " Galvanized, Decker heaved himself upright and over to the control console. The screen was swept with staticky interference lines, and the *Constellation* had no propulsive power left. He fired the maneuvering thrusters to try and swing the ship around, until he had the planet in view - and sure enough, Decker's Bane in plain view as well, unleashing its anti-proton beam on the northeastern continent.

"No...." Decker grated. "No, *no!* Not the planet, you bastard! Me! Come after *me!*" He fired the maneuvering thrusters again, trying to bring the phasers to bear.

"Sir, please hurry," Edgerton urged. "It'll tear this planet apart just as it has the others!"

"Stand by, I've got to reactivate the transporter! Just hold on!" Decker dashed for the corridor, but he tripped and sprawled over a fragment of conduit that had fallen at the half-open doorway. He cursed fluently and struggled back to his feet, running for the nearest ladder.

The planet shook like an ocean liner being battered by a tropical cyclone. The berserker was firing on the northeast continent to the west of the *Constellation* encampment and a good distance away, but the ground still shuddered so viciously as to unsteady most people's footing.

"To answer your question, Lauren...." T'Prea's voice was somewhat above its usual register. "I believe I do feel something."

"What?" Somehow Galbraith felt she already knew the answer.

Indeed, T'Prea's eyes were wide, brows almost horizontal as her respiration deepened. "Fear!"

Decker impatiently shoved the doors to the transporter room open. He rushed to the console and snapped every switch he could lay his fingers on, but the power was completely out. In desperation he slid the activators up and then down again, but there was no response. The transporter was totally dead. He tore open the access panel under the console to find a mess of smoking circuits, melted wires and fried microprocessors. Even a professional transporter technician would need the best part of a week to repair it. He snarled wordlessly to himself and ran back to the corridor.

Only one chance left. His crew had only one hope.

He returned to the auxiliary control room just as the monstrous weapon fired again. It had torn a hole in the landmass that now spurted lava and molten debris into the atmosphere: the landmass had developed a crack that was visible to the naked eye from space. He could hear the impact over the communicator, and then, Samuels's voice.

"It's working its way closer, sir! It's breaking up this whole landmass, it's gonna get to us any minute now!"

"I see it, Danny! The transporter's blasted to hell, it's no good! Edgerton, listen, try and get the shuttlecraft airborne, it's your only chance!"

"We're trying, sir, but their power's been adapted for medical support and we'll need more time to reset it!" Another earthrending crash drowned out the last syllables of Edgerton's reply.

"Sir, what about the phasers?" Samuels hollered. "Can't you draw that thing off?!"

"I'm trying, Danny, I'm trying!" Decker yelled. "I've got to aim the whole ship manually to get a shot off!"

"Commodore...." The new voice stood his hair on end. "Sir, it's Laurie! Please, you've got to do something, we're all going to die here!"

"I'm working on it, damn it!" The seconds were unbearably long as Decker tried to aim the *Constellation* at the planet killer. It fired again. A mountain disintegrated and blasted a great cloud of scalding vapors into the air.

"Please, sir, get it the hell off of us!" Samuels shouted. "We got less than five minutes to live down here!"

"I said, *hold on!*" Decker snapped. He dashed to the weapons console, clenched his fist, and dropped a hammer blow on the phaser control, holding his breath.

The shot never even reached the berserker. It sputtered from the emitter, flickered, and died after three hundred half-hearted meters.

"Commodore, please, *help!*" Galbraith cried.

Nothing was left. No weapons, no power.

"Sir, we're *dying! Help us!*" He had never heard Edgerton's voice steeped in panic before - and if he didn't do something, he'd never hear his first officer's voice again.

The planet killer fired again, systematically working its way across the landmass toward the doomed crew of the *Constellation*. The thundering crash filled the communicator's speaker.

Decker desperately fumbled with the controls as his Bane fired another shot. He tried to maneuver, but the ship didn't respond. Another crash drowned out the dozen voices crying out to him over the communicator. He pounded the impulse controls, pounded again, frantically tried to thrust his ship closer. Still nothing happened.

The ground heaved. Hundreds of voices cried out with horror as hundreds of feet fell out from under their bodies. Fighting to protect lives until the last moment, Jol's technicians hastened to disconnect the medical systems from the shuttlecraft and make the small vessels flyable. The berserker fired again, the ground felt like it turned sideways momentarily, the lake overspilled its shore.

"*Get away from them, God damn you! Leave them alone!*" Rage and frustration overcame Decker as the screen went dark, and the planet killer and its feast disappeared from sight. He slammed on the control console with the flats of both his hands, but the *Constellation* wouldn't budge. Another crash, more screams from the communicator.

It was all finished.

Those few not scrambling about in their final desperate moments for self-preservation were paralyzed with fright as the antimatter beams landed closer and closer. Edgerton rolled over onto his side, crushing his communicator in his hand, his face a contorted rictus of reproach as he cried out for Shona at the top of his voice.

T'Prea and Galbraith huddled together by the shore of the lake, holding each other's heads, seeking one last moment of mental respite. Shaken to their knees, Marlowe and Samuels held each other tightly, sobbing with despair, as the planet killer fired again, and the beam landed squarely at the top of the cliff.

The entire hillside disintegrated. The cliff dissolved into an avalanche, a geological cataract that smashed the shuttlecraft and crushed many of the crew of the *Constellation* where they stood, huddled, even ran for their lives. Still more boulders rolled down the slope toward the lake as the ground opened beneath it and the magma below boiled it into a sky-high column of steam.

In hopeless devastation, Decker sank into the chair behind the console, hands clapped around his head. The static and the breaking-up noises from the communicator reached a crescendo and drowned out the fading beeping from the instrument panels. There was no shutting out the sensation any more than the noise itself.

" — *OMMOD* — "

Madly, blindly, he flailed and swatted the communicator across the room. No stifling that last, desperate cry. He couldn't even tell whose voice it was. No matter. They were all dying horribly, and there was nothing he could do as the last of the *Constellation*'s power failed and the auxiliary control room fell into darkness. He slumped over the console, bemoaning his unspeakable grief.

Another crash.

Then static.

Then silence.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

The remainder of this story will consist of missing scenes alternating with existing scenes from "The Doomsday Machine", written by Norman Spinrad, produced by Paramount Pictures and distributed by CBS Studios (c) 1967. Pre-existing scenes are included strictly for plot advancement and not for putting the Ferengi Alliance to profiteering shame.

Captain's log, Stardate 4202.8. The Enterprise has almost reached the far boundary of Sector L-300, but has still found no trace of the missing starship Constellation. I genuinely fear for what has become of my former commanding officer, but I do not intend to abandon the search before consulting with Starfleet Command. First, I intend to consult with my chief medical officer about what we are likely to find.

"Something smells appealing in here," Kirk said, inhaling deeply as he entered McCoy's office.

"Yeah, it's a little something I'm prescribing for Delta Shift," McCoy said. He filled a coffee cup from a flask and passed it to Kirk. "Here, give it a swig."

Kirk quaffed, stared into the cup and made an impressed face. "Not bad, Bones. Not bad at all. Some secret Southern ingredient to this?"

"Not quite. It's called raktajino, a Klingon brew. I got my hands on a canister during the Organian peace talks. Don't tell the surgeon general." McCoy winked and smiled knowingly as he poured himself a cup.

Kirk raised his eyebrows and stared into the cup again, uncertain of whether or not he should enjoy a Klingon beverage. As he was deliberating, McCoy sat behind his desk and motioned for Kirk to sit in front. "What's on your mind, Jim?"

"This rescue mission of ours. In strictest confidence, the *Constellation* was reported off mission over a month ago. But I was Matt Decker's first officer for more than two years, and I never figured him for a renegade. I'd welcome your expert psychological opinion here."

"It'd help if I knew what sort of mission he was off of. I do know the word around Starfleet Medical a few years ago was that he wasn't very happy when he lost out on getting command of this ship."

"Even though it was on account of bereavement leave?"

"In all fairness, whatever prudish detail officer in the Bureau of Personnel decided on the change should have known better than to overrule the division commander. But let's be honest with ourselves, to read some of your mission logs, it's bound to make any man a mite envious."

Kirk absently sipped the raktajino and frowned. "What are you getting at, Bones? That Matt's taken his ship on some wild space race because he thinks he's got something to prove?"

"I couldn't tell you, Jim," McCoy shook his head. "I don't know him like you do. What I know is that any number of things can drive a man to a nervous breakdown. Injustice, tragedy, trauma, to name just a few. Sometimes they co-occur, exacerbate a personal problem he's already having....and God forbid he got himself into an altercation that caused some kind of neurological damage."

"Which I wouldn't rule out, having learned from the Organian affair what sorts of neurological weapons the Klingons have at their disposal."

"Well, without a close-up psychological evaluation, I couldn't begin to guess at his mental state."

"If we find him - and mind you, that's a big *if* - I'd like you to be ready to perform just such an evaluation."

"Why me? The *Constellation*'s doctor is none other than Jol, the Bolian. There's no one at Starfleet Medical who doesn't know him by reputation. There's nothing I can tell you about Decker that he couldn't."

"That's assuming Jol is still alive and fit for duty himself. Before the Organian affair, the *Constellation* was on a mission similar to ours, but Matt hasn't been heard from since then."

"Complete with the transporter duplicate, the alcoholic virus and the nightmare shore leave?" McCoy said with a wry grin.

Kirk chuckled. "I'm afraid I wouldn't know. But you weren't with us when we encountered the galactic energy barrier and I lost Gary Mitchell to his own delusions of grandeur. If Matt Decker's been subjected to any sort of external neurological trauma during his time as the captain of a starship, I shudder to think what could have resulted from it." He set his coffee cup down emphatically on the desk as the intercom whistled for him, and he leaned over to the comm screen.

"Kirk here," he replied.

"Spock here, Captain. Lieutenant Palmer reports receipt of a general distress call. Origin unknown, but barely intelligible, and broadcast on all Federation emergency channels."

"Very well, Mr. Spock. Put all decks on security alert. Commence a search pattern, I'll be up in a minute." Kirk shut the screen off and stood.

"Might be you're about to get your answers," McCoy commented.

"Or at least I'm about to find the man who has them. But right now, I'm apprehensive about finding out what they are."

He saw nothing.

He felt nothing.

He heard nothing.

He wouldn't have remembered his own name if someone came into the auxiliary control room and asked him what it was. He felt, heard, saw nothing because nothing was left. He even remembered nothing before his last shore leave that mutated into bereavement leave. Maria was dead, his crew was dead, his ship was wrecked beyond any hope of repair. At this point, after his apocalyptic failure, he couldn't even conceive of Will or Brandi being proud to call him father....nothing remained of the life he knew.

Why was he even still living it?

He'd broken so many promises. To Will, to Brandi, to Ray Brienzio and Jim Kirk, to Admiral Komack and Casey Suslowicz, that he would take care of himself, his ship and his crew. To his crew themselves, that he would bring them home alive. To himself, that he would keep the worlds of the Federation safe from destruction. He'd sworn it on Maria's grave....

He'd never have a chance to commend Tara Marlowe for her adroit navigation during Operation Orodruin. He'd never enjoy another thought-provoking chess game with Toshiro Masada. He'd never learn what Stan Dorian's story had been. He'd never forget Anita Seppala's truncated scream as she tried to drag Dorian toward the turbolift just as the bridge decompressed. He'd never hear another one of Danny Samuels's comical, mood-lightening wisecracks.

Laurie Galbraith....she'd been like a daughter to him.

She'd told him right off when Dorian threatened her that she didn't want to die. Now she, Dorian, and all of them were dead because of him.

What was it Marlowe had said about her great-grandfather's axiom? Make a decision and then make it the right one somehow. But now he couldn't remember the last right decision he'd made, any decision that hadn't gotten anyone hurt or killed.

He thought he heard voices somewhere outside in the corridor. He didn't even register them, let alone recognize them. All he heard was echoes of words never to be heard again from their dead speakers. Why, he wondered again, was he still alive? He should have died instead of them; why had his gambit failed and his Bane hadn't opted to finish him off?

Suddenly there was no longer nothing. He sensed something – something incomprehensible, something he was almost afraid to acknowledge for fear that the monster might have returned. Vaguely, he heard his name, felt hands shaking his shoulders, trying to snap him out of it. He didn't respond – couldn't respond, couldn't blink his eyes, breathed shallowly. For a moment he fancied ghosts of his destroyed crew coming back to haunt and defile him for letting them die. Something jabbed into his shoulder, and he reached up absently to rub the spot as a strange tingling sensation ran through his nerves. Then the individual standing over him shook his opposite shoulder again, and he squinted in the faint light from the corridor as the fog began to lift.

"Matt!" the individual repeated insistently.

Still rubbing his shoulder, Decker leaned away and smiled faintly as it dawned on him who the individual was. "Kirk," he croaked, sighing with relief that an old friend had come to his aid. "It's Jim Kirk."

Even as Kirk questioned him, and even as the horror and grief descended upon him yet again, the dawning brightened. Once again, Kirk to the rescue, with the *Enterprise* this time - the ship and crew that Decker should have commanded, and would have if that filthy, disgusting alien disease hadn't so agonizingly drained Maria from his life: the one ship in the entire galaxy that could take on Decker's Bane, let him settle the score and find some peace.

Somehow....somehow he must convince Kirk to hunt the thing down and make it pay for its ghastly deeds, even if it meant pulling rank on him.

But first, some things never changed: least of all Kirk's propensity for going off on some long, drawn-out, irrelevant tangent that he'd been so infamous for holding forth in the officers' lounge on the *Merrimack*. As he listened to his old first officer prattle on about doomsday machines and ancient wars, Decker found that he was absolutely not in the mood: he vehemently let Kirk know it, only to be reminded that the *Constellation* had been reduced to nothing but a crewless, inoperable wreck. His acquiescence to Kirk's demand that he beam aboard the *Enterprise* for treatment was so spontaneous that he didn't even think of the greater implications as he and McCoy stepped back out into the corridor.

The last time he'd left this ship was months ago, when the *Constellation* visited Alrescha II searching for a colony of humans whose ancestors had escaped Earth with outside help just before World War III. That planet had better not have fallen victim to Decker's Bane by this time. This departure, however, was liable to be considerably more permanent.

"I'm sorry about Jol," McCoy said in a muted tone as he and Decker walked back toward the corridor junction where the *Enterprise* boarding party had beamed in.

"Did you know him?"

"The first Bolian to graduate summa cum laude from Starfleet Medical? Who *didn't* know him?" McCoy shook his head. "He was a trailblazer, that one. Wasn't for him, we likely wouldn't have a lot of the extraterrestrial MDs who've joined up in the last decade."

"Yes, I'm aware of the impact he made on the medical community. If anything, I'm painfully aware, having sent him to his death."

McCoy looked at him and studied his haggard appearance, the empty shock in his eyes. So far, he didn't like what his extemporaneous psychological evaluation was telling him. Carefully choosing his words, he said: "Well, there's no doubt in my mind that he went out the same way he spent most of his life, treating the sick and injured."

"Well, it's the damndest thing, isn't it?" Decker said as they paused in the middle of the corridor junction. "Usually doctors are the ones who hold people's lives in their hands. But in the presence of a higher authority, they end up being no better off than anyone else." A soft jolt joined a muted creak from up above as the *Enterprise's* tractor beam cast over the *Constellation* and tugged it gently into motion.

"For what it's worth," McCoy said sagely, "a good doctor doesn't enjoy being responsible for other people's lives any more than a commanding officer does. If you ask me, deciding who lives and who dies should be left to a much higher power than either one of us."

"I just wish I knew how that higher power manages with all the lives that it takes before their time," Decker muttered. McCoy only had time to shoot a concerned glance at him before the familiar tingle of the transporter beam assailed both of them, and the bulkheads of Decker's ruined ship faded from his sight for the last time.

He half hoped that he would materialize in empty space - perhaps on one of the asteroids that remained of the third planet, of his crew. For as long as men had commanded ships, outliving their crews was looked upon as a betrayal, an abject failure of judgment. He could either take his vengeance now, or make the ultimate sacrifice. As Richard Edgerton would have said, there was no middle ground: but as they both reappeared in the *Enterprise's* transporter chamber, it no longer mattered which. By the time they solidified, the red alert was already blaring.

"Come on!" McCoy exhorted, jumping from the pad. Both men bolted from the transporter room, headed for the nearest turbolift at a dead run. Already Decker's heart was going like a triphammer as he dreaded the cause for the general-quarters alarm.

"Bridge," McCoy ordered the lift. As it eased into motion, he turned around, a grim expression lining his face. "I'm sure I don't like the sound of this."

"It could be anything," Decker said tensely, staring fixedly at the crack between the two doors. "But if that beast is still out there with two planets still intact, you'd better prepare yourself for the worst."

The lift halted, and they both dashed forward onto the bridge just in time to hear Kirk's voice from the comm speaker: "We're blind here, what's it look like?"

Decker froze, standing stock-still, curling his fists, uncurling them, curling them again as he observed the image on the main viewer. An image he'd seen far too much of already. Decker's Bane, his own personal chaos demon, the white whale that had permanently wounded him without thought of consequence for its incursions, had returned to finish the job.

The huge machine drew inexorably closer. The business end filled the entire screen as the helmsman looked apprehensively over his shoulder at the stoic Vulcan sitting in the command chair.

"It looks very much like Commodore Decker's planet killer," Spock said matter-of-factly.

Framed on the screen by the *Enterprise's* warp nacelles, the berserker turned to close the chase, blotting out all view of the *Constellation*. Its interior glowed more red-hot than ever: the energy field blazed like a nebula made of flame.

"And it is pursuing us," Spock added as the entire bridge was bathed in the fiery glare.

"Readings, Mr. Spock," Kirk's voice, masked by the interference, hissed from the captain's speaker. "Give me a full report. I want to know exactly what it is we're dealing with."

"A moment, Captain," Spock said, rising. In a few long strides he was on the upper level of the bridge, bending over the viewer at the main science station. "Machine is approximately fifteen miles in length; width of its maw roughly two point one miles. Hull composed of neutronium, impervious to all known weapons. Interior temperature three hundred and ten degrees Celsius, no doubt on account of some sort of anti-matter energy field purposed to absorb mineral fuels." Spock paused and squinted into the sensor viewer, his head inclining to one side. "Fascinating. Carbon dating indicates an approximate age of three billion years."

"Three *billion!*" McCoy repeated in a stunned whisper.

"My God," Decker muttered with a disbelieving shake of his head. "Can you imagine how many people it's killed over all that time?"

"The object does not appear capable of warp speed," Spock continued. "Unfortunately, Captain, the state of the *Constellation's* structural integrity would prohibit engaging our own warp drive without releasing the tractor beam."

"Are you still maintaining distance, Mr. Spock?" Kirk demanded more than asked.

"We are more maneuverable, but it is gaining on us," Spock answered, glancing at the screen. "Sensors indicate some kind of total conversion drive. No evidence of life; subspace interference level incredibly high."

"Well, whatever it is," Kirk said determinedly, "we can't let it go beyond us to the next solar system, we have to stop it. If it's a robot, what are the chances of deactivating it?"

"I would say none, Captain. The energy generated by our power nacelles seems to attract it. I doubt we could maneuver close enough without drawing a direct attack upon ourselves. I also believe the nature of this machine precludes the possibility of easy access to its control mechanisms."

Decker paced to the port side of the bridge, stealing a glance at the helmsman's control console. The main viewer was at regular magnification. The weapon was perilously close behind them - perhaps three, perhaps four minutes away from engulfing both ships if they couldn't outrun it.

"It's closing on us, Mr. Spock," the helmsman called out.

"Closing, Captain," Spock relayed.

"All right, lower your deflector screens long enough to beam us aboard." Kirk's voice was masked with static.

"Acknowledged," Spock said. "Transporter room, stand by to beam landing party aboard."

Only vaguely did Decker hear the transporter chief's acknowledgement of the order. He stared in horror at the main viewer, his breath catching at the sight of the machine's energy field brightening. The helmsman's fingers were half a second from snapping off the deflectors and the berserker was about the same span from cutting loose -

"*Incoming!*" Decker hollered, grabbing the nearest console. His warning came a poor second too late. Taken by surprise, only a few of the bridge crew had time to do the same before the solid yellow beam arced forth from the weapon's maw.

The *Enterprise* rocked madly to starboard as the beam impacted on the lower port side of the primary hull. The ship heaved, flung more than forty degrees off course, tractor beam severed and throwing the *Constellation* off in the opposite direction. All hands were pitched violently sideways: Decker fell over the railing into the well, but he had nonetheless been first to feel the planet killer's wrath and was now the first to recover from its assault. He struggled up into the helmsman's seat, Spock gaining ground alongside him and easing the *Enterprise* back onto an even keel; if Vulcans were capable of gratitude, it was as evident in the first officer's expression as it would ever be. Sighing, Decker shoved himself clear of the helm and back to the upper level of the bridge.

"Evasive action, Mr. Sulu," Spock ordered calmly. "Damage report, all stations."

"Mr. Spock, the transporter's out!" was the first squawk from the speaker.

"Effect repairs," Spock replied, switching channels. "Captain Kirk, come in, please."

"Kirk here."

"Captain, we have been attacked. Transporter is damaged, we're taking evasive action."

"Mr. Spock, communications damaged," Lieutenant Palmer called out. "We're unable to override interference!"

"Damage to communications, Captain," Spock repeated. "Interference will make voice contact impossible. Request you stand by until we are able to make sufficient repairs."

Only static and interference responded. Eyebrows slanting even further than normal, Spock regarded the speaker. "Please acknowledge. Captain Kirk, respond, please. Miss Palmer?"

"Contact lost, sir," came Palmer's doleful reply.

"The shape that ship's in, she's a sitting duck," McCoy muttered. "If Jim can't get her underway and that thing decides she's an easier target...."

"I think that distinctly unlikely, Doctor," Spock said factually as he resumed the command chair. "The *Constellation's* power output is immeasurably low. The object will undoubtedly pursue and attack the most salient source of energy within its immediate vicinity."

"But there's still plenty of sources out there bigger than us," Decker said grimly. "If I were you, Mr. Spock, I'd be damned careful about minding our heading. If we lead that thing near an inhabited solar system, a lot of people are going to get hurt."

"All right, lads," Scott called out to Elliott and Russ as he returned to the upper level of main engineering. "Captain's orders, we've a miracle to work! And let's thank our lucky stars these impulse engines only have a couple of years on 'em!" He dropped down the ladder to the main deck and made a beeline for the fusion reactor.

"What's going on topside, sir?" Russ asked.

"Found out what's caused all this damage." Scott switched on his tricorder and began to circle the reactor like a buzzard. "An alien weapon the likes o' which we've never seen in our day, and it's come to mak' siccar on the *Enterprise* this time." He examined the reactor shielding, then the tricorder readings. "All right, there's just enough inert deuterium left to trigger a reaction. Elliott, cross-circuit the impulse controls to the emergency power reserves and let's see if we can light this off."

"How can we prevent the reactor from overloading and blowing the entire ship to bits?" Elliott questioned. "It'll be damn near impossible with the condition it's in!"

Scott gave him a sidelong glance and grinned. "Laddie, they took the word 'impossible' out of the Starfleet engineering lexicon after my graduation. Now you can either connect the phaser transfer coil or hold my Scotch, but be quick about makin' up your mind!"

Decker found the shock and horror of that first engagement almost completely gone as he stood at the rear of the *Enterprise* bridge, watching the crew go about their motions. He felt his good old comfortable authority returning. Casualty and damage reports were still coming in, but this crew seemed less shaken, knowing in advance what they were dealing with. The crew that could have been his, if not for a cruel twist of fate.

He considered that he'd gotten just a tad too familiar with the crew of the *Constellation* in some cases, that maybe Dorian had had a point when he accused Decker of playing favorites with certain junior officers. Well, whether that sneaky bastard had been onto something or not, Decker didn't intend to repeat that mistake, or any other he'd made during the first round.

Suddenly and to much surprise, the berserker broke off the chase. For only a moment, Decker tried to remember if Masada had been able to determine its heading to its next target, but only a moment was needed: Sulu already had its next target on the board.

Rigel.

Exactly what Decker had been afraid of. And if it was headed for Rigel now, Delta wouldn't be far; and Will was still stationed there. An evacuation alert, even if it cut through the subspace interference, would be too little too late, considering the logistics of evacuating a dozen planets populated by billions of people.

Logistics. God, poor Laurie, the tortures of the mind and the senses she must have endured in the last ephemeral minutes of her life. The foul thing must be stopped at all costs.

But Spock was having none of it. Decker had pretended to himself that, being half human, Spock might not so rigidly adhere to the principles of logic by which the rest of his race swore, even young women like T'Pol. All too quickly it was borne upon Decker that, once again, he'd sorely miscalculated - Spock's human half had had the opposite effect, incited him to embrace with even greater fervor the tenets of logic and reason. If you'd debated one Vulcan, you'd debated them all. And Decker had no time to waste on debates, especially debates in which his opponent not only invoked the gut-wrenching loss of his ship and crew, but reminded him of a member of it, and forced him to admit a fatal mistake. Every second they wasted here might as well be one more life lost when the planet killer reached Rigel. Fed up with Spock's arguments, and driven by sheer determination, Decker ordered him out of the seat, an act that raised McCoy's own temper to boiling point.

For a moment it was touch and go. Decker barely restrained himself from lashing out when Spock cited the criteria for relieving him of command for medical reasons. This was a bit less heated than his previous confrontation with another first officer and ship's doctor on this subject, but the threatened result would be no different and he could stand not to be reminded of those two senior officers to whom he'd been so close before the massacre. However, McCoy, having only just brought Decker on board, was a bit less prepared to act than Jol had been. Fuming, McCoy went below as ordered, leaving only Spock to stare unblinkingly at Decker from right beside him.

Decker regarded the stonefaced Spock for a moment, then slowly turned in the chair, eyeing the engineering officer, the helmsman, the communication technicians one at a time. All eyes were on him, all but Spock perturbed, none of them quite sure of how to take this little development. No matter. He was in command now, all they had to do was follow his orders and do their duty as Starfleet Academy had taught them to do. Will could have been on that bridge and Decker wouldn't have regarded him any differently from the rest.

He turned forward and ordered a pursuit course. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Sulu turned back to his console and acknowledged the orders, thrusting the *Enterprise* ahead. In an almost graceful move the great starship leaned into a reverse turn, stars sweeping diagonally across the main viewer as it accelerated back toward the planet killer's heading.

"Lieutenant, put me on speakers," Decker called over his shoulder to Lieutenant Palmer.

"All decks standing by." Palmer's voice was soft and impassive.

"Attention, crew of the *Enterprise*," Decker announced. "This is Commodore Decker. I have assumed command of this vessel under the authority granted me by Starfleet regulations. That planet-eating superweapon is still on the loose, and we are going to pursue and destroy it, regardless of the risks we have to take and the price we have to pay. Obey your orders and carry out your duties as you would if Captain Kirk was aboard. We will avenge the loss of countless billions of lives during that weapon's reign of terror, and we will protect our Federation from total annihilation. That is all." He shut off the intercraft speaker and leaned back in the chair, scuffing the computer disks between his fingers.

Spock hadn't budged since he'd stood up from the chair. Decker couldn't tell if he'd so much as blinked those dark, inscrutable Vulcan eyes.

"Tell me, Spock," he said. His voice was calm to the point of casual as self-confidence and determination washed through him again. "Has Jim ever told you about our escapade over Dimidium?"

"He has," Spock replied flatly.

"He was my first officer then. He knew what we had to do, as any good first officer knows what's necessary in a battle situation."

"Indeed, Commodore. However, it would be dereliction of my duty not to remind you that these circumstances are not at all similar. Unlike our adversary, the Manticore missile was not indestructible - in fact, it *was* designed to explode on impact."

"Sir, we have contact!" Sulu interrupted. "Bearing ten degrees mark six, range one hundred thousand and closing. It's still headed for Rigel."

"It won't get far," Decker asserted. He sat up straight in the chair and looked at Spock, who still stared at him impassively without even blinking. His were the only eyes on the bridge that didn't lock fast on the viewscreen as the planet killer reappeared, tail first, headed away from the *Enterprise* as it raced to catch its nemesis. Decker smiled to himself. That vile abhorrence thought it could devour his entire crew and get away with it, but it was in for a very nasty surprise indeed.

"Mr. Spock, kindly return to your post," he said quietly. "I want updates to the minute on our battle readiness and that machine's maneuvers."

He kept his eyes locked on the viewer as Spock strode wordlessly behind him, ascending to the upper level of the bridge. Activating his sensor viewer, he bent over and focused. "The object is aware of us, Commodore," he reported calmly. "It is turning onto an intercept course; velocity increasing. Rate of closure approximately warp three."

"That's right, you big-mouthed son of a bitch, I'm back," Decker muttered under his breath. "And this time you're the one who's going to

suffer."

"Mr. Spock," Palmer cut in. "Engineering reports a power drain from the antimatter pods. Best available speed now warp seven point eight."

Cocking an eyebrow, Spock turned around, his eyes on Decker. "If memory serves, Commodore, the electromagnetic field generated by the machine's hull rendered the *Constellation* powerless. The same will surely befall the *Enterprise* if you persist in this course of action."

"You heard what your captain said," Decker replied. "We can't afford to let that thing reach another populated solar system. And I am *not* letting it off the hook. Range?"

"Eighty thousand kilometers," Sulu said, peering into his viewer. "Closing fast."

"Deflectors at full power," Spock reported. "They can't take much more of this."

Decker was tiring of Spock's objections – he was almost starting to wish that he *had* relieved the insufferable Vulcan of duty. He shrugged off Spock's warning, nodding in Sulu's direction. "Helmsman, hold your course," he ordered. "Stand by all phaser banks."

"Aye, aye, sir," Sulu said flatly.

It was then that the planet killer cut loose, jolting the *Enterprise* almost to a complete halt. As it was, the ship's momentum had reduced by nearly half when a second impact slammed against the forward shields. Decker grimaced, clutching the arms of the command chair, determined to concentrate; he wouldn't let that thing intimidate him again. He leaned forward, eyes on the viewer, scowling defiantly down the planet killer's throat.

"Deflectors holding, but weakening," Spock said, his voice calm but insistent. "We must retreat, Commodore. The energy drain – "

"I'm in command here, Mr. Spock," Decker said curtly. "Maintain course, helmsman. Get us in closer!"

"Steady on course, sir," Sulu acknowledged. "Resuming full speed. We're twenty thousand kilometers out, eighty KPS closure." He spared a quick glance away from his sensor viewer, just long enough to snap the phaser banks onto standby. "All phasers indicate ready."

"Very well," Decker said. "Increase attitude six hundred meters. I want to hit that thing outside its angle of attack."

"Six hundred meters, aye," Sulu said. He punched the two toggle switches on the far end of the panel, firing maneuvering thrusters forward and aft to raise the *Enterprise's* bow. Decker fingered the two computer disks restlessly, his pulse racing with excitement as he saw the bottom edge of the planet killer's maw vanish from the screen. They were in close, perilously close, and even if the machine could hit them at this angle, it still needed its few seconds of recharge time between blasts.

"Range," he said sharply.

"Eight thousand kilometers and closing," Sulu said, peering into his viewer. "Six hundred meters attained, sir."

"Phasers stand by...." Decker clenched his teeth. Point-blank range and the planet killer still hadn't opened up again. At last he would have his moment of reckoning - and revenge.

Chapter 16

From out of the shadow a red sword leaped flaming.

Glamdring glittered white in answer.

There was a ringing clash and a stab of white fire. The Balrog fell back and its sword flew up in molten fragments. The wizard swayed on the bridge, stepped back a pace, and then again stood still.

"All right, you heard the announcement," McCoy barked at his staff as he returned to the sick bay. "We've got a certifiable madman in command of this ship and I've got some records to compile. Get ready to receive casualties - lots of 'em!" He plopped down behind his desk and punched the switch on his recording computer. "Medical log, U.S.S. *Enterprise*, Dr. Leonard McCoy recording. Discovered the starship U.S.S. *Constellation* crippled and adrift, her entire crew killed by an alien automaton except for her commanding officer, Commodore Matthew Decker. Initial examination revealed no external trauma, aside from a slight concussion that most likely caused a brief loss of consciousness. At the request of Captain Kirk, I conducted an informal psychological screening of Commodore Decker to ascertain his mental state, and found him to be in a state of deep shock and post-traumatic stress. My preliminary evaluation disclosed that Commodore Decker is now preoccupied with death, indicating a bout of suicidal ideation. He has since pulled rank and assumed command of the *Enterprise* in Captain Kirk's absence, informing First Officer Spock that his top priority is destroying the alien weapon that killed his people.

"First Officer Spock made Commodore Decker aware that the alien machine cannot be damaged by the *Enterprise's* weapon systems, but the commodore ignored him, and as of this recording he has ordered the *Enterprise* into action against it. His obsession with destroying it, despite the futility of the effort, alongside his suicidal ideation is bound to result in an exact repeat of the calamity involving the *Constellation*. It is my professional judgment that - "

All of a sudden McCoy grunted loudly as the planet killer's first blast struck the *Enterprise* head on. Thrown back from his desk, he had barely regained his balance when the second blow slammed home. He caught himself on the edge of the desk and glared upward, listening to the rattle of fragile items in the display case behind him. If Decker's recklessness caused any irreparable harm to his prized set of Denebian tungsten allotropes, there would be hell to pay. Cursing to himself, he stood up and bent back over the computer terminal.

"Pause entry!" he snapped. He strode into the examination room to find Nurse Chapel and two orderlies picking up hyposprays and instruments that had been scattered all over the deck. "Damn it, don't leave equipment adrift, this is what's bound to happen!"

"Sorry, Doctor," one of the orderlies said plaintively. "We were just on our way to set these out for use."

"Well, get 'em in order and get 'em secured! We'll be taking casualties in here any minute now!" On McCoy strode into the recovery ward, where he found the nurses scrambling to prepare the biobeds.

"*FIRE!*" Decker roared.

Only the *Enterprise's* distance from the points of impact protected it from being hit by its own phaser beams as they ricocheted off the stout hull of the planet killer. Even at this close range, the machine was uninhibited.

"Direct hit!" Sulu's gaze darted from one warning light on his control panel to another, warning him of everything from a drain in warp power to the threat of the machine's gravity well.

"It just...bounced off," he uttered, perplexed beyond more cogent words.

"Commodore, I urgently recommend immediate withdrawal," Spock said with an unusual intensity to his voice.

"Recommendation noted, maintain course," Decker replied dismissively. "*Fire!*"

The *Enterprise* swooped close in above the berserker as Sulu continued blasting away with the phasers, narrowly avoiding a collision that could surely have crushed the engineering section. He responded by angling the *Enterprise* away from the planet killer and darting off ahead of it, firing all the while. And still the monster lumbered on, seeming to regard the *Enterprise* as an elephant might regard a lone mosquito, as if trying to determine if this irritating little starship was the same one that had attacked it earlier, and how it had rebounded from its near destruction.

"Still no effect, sir!" Sulu reported with a vigorous shake of his head. "We aren't even making a dent in that thing! There's just no way to blast through it!"

"Leave the scientific opinions to Mr. Spock, helmsman," Decker said sharply. "Bring us around and get us back up above it! Ready on photon torpedoes!"

"My scientific opinion, sir, concurs with Mr. Sulu's," Spock rejoined. "It is not logical to continue phaser attack and waste our firepower against an invulnerable opponent."

"You won't find anyone in the Rigel system worrying about logic when that thing eats them alive!" Decker snapped. "One more remark like that and - " He broke off as the *Enterprise* heaved and jolted under another blast. The planet killer had altered its own angle of attack the same as the *Enterprise*, not only shooting on an up-angle, but shooting from a point where its energy field was out of view. That attack had come without the warning of the field's increasing brightness. The warning beacon on the helm flashed threateningly along with an alert light on the

helm console.

"Photon torpedoes inoperable, sir!" Sulu exclaimed. "The bay's taken damage!"

Decker's Bane struck again. Spock quickly checked his instruments, snapped a couple of switches, arose from his station and paced over toward the aft side of the bridge. "Sir, deflector shields are gone," he reported without undertone.

"Dr. McCoy!" the orderly hollered from the examination-room doorway. "Major casualties on the way up from the main torpedo bay. A dozen and counting!"

"Set up a triage in my office!" McCoy hollered back. He affixed an osteomender to the forehead of a concussion patient and dashed to another crewmember with a broken arm on the other side of the ward, painkiller hypo in his hand. He pointedly aimed the hypo away from both the patient and himself - the episode with the Guardian of Forever had taught him *that* lesson with brutal clarity.

"Doctor, at this rate, the casualties will be too much to handle inside of ten minutes!" Nurse Chapel protested.

"Tell me something I don't know!" McCoy scowled with the effort he was exerting to reset the fracture. "Decker's off his nut, and Spock hasn't got the sense to stand up to him! Honestly, Nurse, I don't know what you see in that green-blooded hobgoblin!" Another hit nearly threw him off his feet as he rushed down the ward to treat a dislocated hip.

"Dr. McCoy!" the orderly yelled from the exam room. "Lieutenant Levens from phaser control, he's got a fractured vertebra and partial paralysis!"

"I'll be right there!" McCoy's face twisted from scowl to snarl as he feverishly worked to relieve the current patient's pain. "When this is over, I'll have Decker in restraints so fast he won't even have time to consent!"

Another hit. McCoy stormed to the exam room to check on Lieutenant Levens, but his pace slowed. Suddenly the ship had gone strangely quiet. Then a soft, high-pitched, vibrating hum, barely within human hearing range, began to emanate from the bulkheads around them.

"What in the name of..." McCoy looked around. The sound seemed to be everywhere. He had no time to pin it down now, however. He put it out of his mind and strode over to the injured man on the exam table and grabbed another osteomender.

"How's it look, lad?" Scott asked Russ as he stowed away the phase inhibitor.

"Managed to scrounge up enough residual energy from the aft phaser array to ignite a reaction from the deuterium," Russ replied. "It'll give us half impulse power - but whether the warp control circuits will hold up under the surge, you got me."

"No cause for fret, so long as she's still got some life left in her," Scott reassured him. He moved up beside Washburn at the power distribution panel. "Let's link a bypass to the number two phaser bank to prevent the circuits from overloadin'." He had just commenced throwing switches when his communicator beeped impatiently.

"Scotty, give me that power!"

Decker was frustrated beyond words. The berserker had slaughtered hundreds, even thousands, destroyed whole worlds with the same form as Earth, would go on to devour millions more, and all Spock could prattle about was logic. And yet this time, his logic was as inescapable as the tractor beam that had pegged them.

"Veer off!" he groaned finally. As the tractor beam tightened its grasp on the *Enterprise*, he sagged over the arm of the chair, sick with defeat. He might as well give up the fight and let the damned beast gobble them up here and now. He'd failed to stop the machine for the second time, and for all he had, Spock had just threatened him with relief for the second time. He barely paid a mind to Spock and Sulu fighting to the last, a futile effort, a waste of power for which Spock had criticized him not even ten minutes ago.

"Estimated time to absorption?" Spock demanded.

"No more than three or four minutes, sir..." Sulu glanced into his sensor viewer for confirmation, but he froze in mid-lean. Then he pitched forward again, gripped the viewer tightly in one hand and pressed his eyes deep into it. "Sir, the *Constellation*! She's underway and closing!"

"What?" Decker blurted, looking up.

"She's only making one-half impulse power, but she's coming in from our starboard hand and closing on the planet killer!"

"Evidently Mr. Scott's ingenuity has yet to fail us," Spock observed.

At last Decker sat up straight, slapping the arm of the chair. "And don't you forget about Jim Kirk's tenacity in action. Full power astern!"

"Aye, sir!" Sulu acknowledged as he engaged reverse thrust. Shudder and shake though the great starship might, the greater mass of the planet killer still filled more and more of the screen as it drew the ship into its gut with agonizing slowness.

"We still can't move," Sulu puffed. "Estimate two minutes to no return!"

"Ms. Palmer, attempt to raise the *Constellation*," Spock ordered. "If we can ascertain the captain's intentions - "

"It won't do a damned bit of good!" Decker interrupted. "We drained our phasers completely against that bastard!" He gesticulated at the screen - the berserker's maw now filled it almost entirely: only a few stars were visible at the corners.

"And you intend to repeat the action with the *Enterprise*?" Spock inquired.

"In a few minutes, it won't make any difference!" Decker fiddled restlessly with the computer disks in his fingers and turned to Sulu. "Full phasers, fire, point-blank!"

"Full phasers, aye!" Sulu held onto the edge of his console with one hand and punched the phaser switch with the other, firing a prolonged burst into the gaping, flaming maw before them. The first salvo vanished into the energy field to no visible effect, but the *Enterprise* shook harder still as it fought the relentless pull of the tractor beam. The second salvo went awry, striking a glancing blow against the side of the planet killer's interior. Before disbelieving eyes, the beam bounced ineffectively off the inner side and proceeded to ricochet haphazardly about the interior until it, too, vanished into the energy field and was lost to view.

"Phasers still no good, sir!" Sulu said with a frustrated huff.

"Lieutenant Palmer?" Spock called aft.

"I'm sorry, sir," Palmer replied. "I still can't get through to the *Constellation*. The interference is too heavy!"

"Then we must trust that Captain Kirk has a plan of action." Spock stood up straight, still, bracing himself on the helm console against the *Enterprise*'s shuddering, staring into the fiery glare radiating from the planet killer's interior. "Preferably a plan that can be carried out in under a minute."

Emergency power straining, the *Enterprise* struggled against the berserker's pull. Impulse power alternately surging and weakening, the *Constellation* staggered closer. Scott and his three men, scrambling to do the work of two dozen, blessed the foresight of connecting the phaser transfer coil to the impulse reactor when Kirk expressed an offhanded wish for weapons capability.

"*Constellation* is at eight thousand kilometers and closing," Sulu reported. "He - " The report went incomplete as he stared in disbelief at the screen. In one corner, the half-dozen visible stars were lost to view behind a single blue-white beam of phaser fire punching squarely against the planet killer's side. Decker's contention notwithstanding, the unimaginable had lapsed into reality and not a moment too soon. The *Enterprise* jolted as the tractor beam suddenly dropped, and the forward thrusters regained traction, pushing the ship away from the massive machine as it released one target and turned to face the other: it almost seemed to recognize its former nemesis for a moment.

"We're loose, Commodore!" Sulu exulted.

"Good boy, Jim," Decker muttered. "Between the two of us, we'll kill that thing."

"It's closing fast on the *Constellation*," Spock observed.

In less than a second Sulu had the main phasers ready. "Standing by, sir."

Spock turned to Decker, his expression unchanged. "Commodore, I suggest - "

"Kirk pulled us out of there by distracting it," Decker cut him off. "Now it's our turn. Fire phasers!"

With two starships to contend with, the berserker's one-on-one advantage dissolved. As before, the *Enterprise*'s assault did no more good than trying to penetrate a cement wall with a haystack, but it effectively drew the planet killer off its crippled sister, barely breaking away from the machine's gravitational pull and avoiding another peg from its tractor beam.

"Did it!" Decker exclaimed. "Hard about. Gimme some distance!"

For a few heart-stopping seconds it appeared as though the sluggishly thrusting *Enterprise* would fail to escape the machine's line of fire again. Yet somehow, in only a few seconds, Sulu managed to haul off, opening the distance by several thousand kilometers before the berserker resumed its breathless pursuit back into the debris field.

"We're moving away, Commodore," Sulu exhaled, relaxing only in the slightest.

Decker sighed and shared in the young helmsman's feeling of relief. Even in the face of another massively destructive alien superweapon, maybe they had a chance after all. Just like Dimidium, he and Jim Kirk were on the same mission to stop a planet-smashing alien device with two separate ships. With his decisive authority again coupled to Kirk's resourcefulness, it would take a power beyond comprehension to stop them now.

Kirk, however, did not share his enthusiasm; he was preoccupied with the near loss of the *Enterprise*, and furious that Decker had taken it into action without him. Rank, regulation, revenge were of no consequence to the younger man and it was anyone's guess if he would live long enough to face the consequences. Decker already had half a mind to charge him with insubordination: captains didn't speak to other captains, let alone commodores, as if they were trying to herd an uncooperative toddler toward a playpen.

"Commodore Decker." Spock's quiet tone was even more bone-chilling than his unbreakable gaze. "You are relieved of command."

"I don't recognize your authority to relieve me." Decker barely withheld a scoff as he leaned away from Spock and ogled the bridge engineering station, trying to avoid that stare.

"You may file a formal protest with Starfleet Command, assuming we survive to reach a Starbase," Spock told him. "But you are relieved."

Biting his knuckle tensely, Decker twitched, tried to ignore Spock. He had little doubt that the unfeeling Vulcan could and would drop him with a nerve pinch, maybe even a blow to the back of the neck. Damnably, his resolve wavered. If it came to a confrontation of more than words, this was no Stanley Dorian he was facing - there was no way he would last single handed against Spock.

"Commodore, I do not wish to place you under arrest," Spock said, tightening the screw.

"You wouldn't *dare*." Decker finally turned to stare at him in disbelief. If Spock was playing the game Decker thought he was playing, it was good for two players.

Spock, however, made a wordless gesture to the two security guards standing on either side of the turbolift. They both moved forward, eyes locked on Decker, hands splayed out at their sides. They were like a pair of Iridian sabercats ready to pounce on a crippled, flightless pteryxid. But Spock still hadn't broken his stare.

"You're bluffing," Decker muttered, faking unconcern.

"Vulcans never bluff." Spock's voice was absolutely guileless.

Decker stared at him for what seemed like a long moment, but was truly a blink in time compared to the penetrating gaze Spock had been levelling at him. All that came to mind was T'Prea's unflinching nerve assault on her friend Laurie Galbraith to truncate the Dorian problem. No, Vulcans did not bluff. They took whatever action they deemed possible and logical, even if it came down to subduing a superior officer or assaulting a friend.

"No," he said finally. "No, I don't suppose that they do. Very well, Mr. Spock. The bridge is yours."

With quiet resignation, he slowly hoisted himself out of the chair, imagining what sort of psychological mumbo-jumbo McCoy would concoct to declare him unfit for duty. Spock retook his place and informed Kirk: but he wasn't quite finished with Decker yet.

"Commodore," he said, "I believe you are scheduled for a medical examination. Mr. Montgomery, you will accompany the commodore to sick bay."

"Aye, sir. Commodore?" The security guard gestured for Decker to enter the turbolift and then stepped in with him, standing uncomfortably close. "Deck three," he ordered the lift.

Decker glanced obliquely at him as the lift eased downward. "Maybe Spock's right," he said matter-of-factly. "Maybe I could use some medical attention. I don't know about you, but I could do with a cup of coffee."

"I'm good, sir," Montgomery said simply.

Wordlessly, Decker nodded. He held the young man in the corner of his eye as the lift came to a stop and the doors opened. He took two slow, carefully planned steps, inhaled sharply, and faked a heavy cough.

He successfully caught Montgomery off guard as he backfisted him squarely in the face. Montgomery yelled in surprise, but as Decker snatched his phaser from his belt, he recovered quickly and knocked the weapon out of his grasp, flinging it against the bulkhead. Decker tried to go after it, but Montgomery quickly twisted him around and grabbed him in a quarter-Nelson, trying to pinion his arms.

Age and treachery versus youth and speed. Or better yet, strength versus agility. Montgomery might have been more limber and flexible, but Decker was stronger. Bit by bit, he overcame Montgomery's grip and rammed both fists backward, catching the guard's face in opposing blows. He caught Montgomery by surprise again - the lad hadn't been expecting such scrappy opposition from an older man whose mental health was off kilter. Decker elbowed him in the chest and gave him a double back fist to the spinal column, but Montgomery didn't go down so easily. They circled each other, panting, snarling, squaring off like a pair of timber wolves fighting over a mate. One step at a time, Decker moved in, tried to feint another hook into a right cross, but now Montgomery was ready for him. He deflected the punch, blocked another awkward hook from Decker and threw one of his own, sending him crashing to his knees against the bulkhead.

For a few seconds Decker knelt there, wheezing heavily, pretending to be injured and exhausted. He kept his peripheral vision on Montgomery, waiting for him to move in for the knockout blow. The kid's pride must have been wounded worse than his cheekbones at being bettered by this curmudgeonly senior officer. He edged forward and was just about to kick Decker in the face when Decker shot upright, landing a blow in Montgomery's stomach and doubling him over.

That was it - time to finish this. He elbowed the pressure point on the back of Montgomery's neck, driving him to his knees, and gave him a hard kick in the kidney, sending him sprawling. Montgomery made one last attempt to struggle back to his feet, but Decker clasped his fists together, drew himself upright and landed a double hammer blow on the guard's lungs, knocking the wind out of him. Down and out for the count, Montgomery flopped forward into the opening doorway of a nearby storeroom. Without wasting another slug, Decker strode into the room, dragged Montgomery inside and tossed him up against the aft bulkhead.

"You should've gone for the phaser when you had the chance, you dumb kid," Decker muttered at the unconscious Montgomery as he deposited him on the deck in the storage room. He was on his way back to the door when he glanced at a shelf beside it - a shelf holding a dozen portable log recorders, apparently unused. He sighed, picked one up, hastened back to the corridor, glanced furtively in both directions, and grabbed Montgomery's still-adrift phaser. He ducked back into the turbolift and ordered it to the observation deck.

"Mr. Spock, I have Dr. McCoy on the internal channel," Palmer called over her shoulder.

Spock's only reaction was to turn on the speaker beside him. "Doctor, this is Spock. We have made contact with Captain Kirk and - "

"Never mind the preamble to the Constitution, Spock, what in blazes is going on up there?!" McCoy burst out. "I got damn near a third of the crew in triage down here!"

"Please reserve your emotional reactions for a more appropriate moment, Doctor," Spock replied. "The captain has enabled Commodore Decker's relief. He will arrive in sick bay momentarily."

"It's about damn time! I'll show him right to the head of the line so he can see what he's done to these people! Now are we withdrawing, or is that thing going to run us completely ragged?"

"We are attempting to withdraw, but the object does not seem willing to permit it. However, I am quite certain the commodore will appreciate your impassioned display of medical professionalism." Spock's words infringed on sarcasm. He turned the speaker off and asked Sulu for an update on the planet killer's range: it was holding steady, but only so long as the *Enterprise's* main power would hold out.

He'd lost his wife, his crew, his ship, and his chance for vengeance. He couldn't keep going like this - if he did, God only knew how much worse he could possibly make this situation.

There was only one thing for it.

So much of this battle called to Decker's mind the encounter with the Manticore over Dimidium. Himself in command of one ship and Kirk in command of another - a badly damaged ship that wasn't even his. A planet-killing weapon that shook off every attempt to stop it, far less destroy it. They had only stopped the Manticore thanks to the sacrifice of one man, a man who had thought himself a coward but had let himself die rather than face judgment. Decker couldn't even remember that scared lieutenant's name now. All he knew was that the man whose panicked voice he'd heard over intercom, but whose face he'd never seen, had steered the *Leonis* straight into the Manticore's warhead to buy escape time for Kirk and the survivors. Whoever that man was, Decker had him to thank for showing him the only open path left.

How had that young man acquitted himself in the *Kobayashi Maru* test? Had he ever even taken it?

Decker paused for a moment in the deserted corridor and thought back to his own trial, so many years ago, before he'd ever envisioned having his own ship. His own solution had been to evacuate survivors in shuttlecraft and escape pods, and hope to God the simulated Klingons wouldn't pick off every escape craft to be set loose. The last thing he remembered from the test was an impenetrable wall of smoke blanketing the entire bridge simulator, cutting visibility to little further than the tip of his nose. No one had ever told him whether he'd succeeded in evacuating the crew: he had decided there was little to lose by repeating the gambit once the *Constellation* had been disabled. But this time they weren't dealing with simulated Klingons, not even with real ones - and definitely no Organians around to throw a spanner into the works. They were hard up against an indiscriminate, utterly murderous superweapon that had no time to deal with a disabled ship when there were hundreds of planets to demolish and devour.

Kirk's own solution to the *Kobayashi Maru* scenario was by now the stuff of Starfleet legend. From the bridge simulator to the bridge of the *Enterprise*, he had built his entire career on cheating death. And now it occurred to Decker: did his old first officer even care who had to die so that he could go on fighting?

One day, someone close to Kirk would die, and he would be unable to prevent it, much less bear the guilt of it. No better than Decker could now bear the guilt of destroying his crew. Leaving Shona Edgerton and her daughters without a husband and father, leaving uncounted other families without sons and daughters.

Sucking in a deep breath, he lurched into motion and headed for the nearest utility ladder.

He heard a damage control party rushing aft in the corridor just below him and paused, holding his breath. Once their footfalls had faded, he continued descending the ladder, looked furtively up and down the corridor, and checked the plating on the bulkhead next to the ladder well to see what section he was in. Still four decks to descend. He ran for the next section aft and jumped into another ladder well.

When he finally reached a solid deck, he peeked out of it again to read the plate on the bulkhead: SHUTTLECRAFT HANGAR DECK. This was where he wanted to be. He was just about to hasten down the corridor when three more crewmembers appeared from an intersecting corridor and headed for a turbolift. Decker concealed himself in the ladder well, waited for them to get out of sight and then headed for the junction. He looked around, made sure he was unobserved and then made a mad dash for the airlock.

"McCoy to bridge!"

Evidently the channel was still open. Frowning, Spock turned on the speaker and responded.

"Are you sure Decker's on his way down here?" McCoy demanded. "I'm still waiting on him, and there's plenty more important things I could be doing right now."

"He left the bridge with Lieutenant Montgomery approximately ten minutes and fifty-five seconds ago," Spock's frown deepened. "If he has not yet arrived...."

"He sure as hell hasn't. And in his condition, he's the last man I want running around the ship unescorted."

"We find ourselves in a rare moment of agreement, Doctor." Spock half-turned. "Ms. Palmer, security alert to all decks. Locate and restrain Commodore Decker, and convey him to sick bay at once."

So far, so good. He hadn't gotten caught, now the only trick would be getting out of the hangar before someone on the bridge noticed a warning light. This would involve a risky move, but what the hell? He'd taken enough risks in the past couple of days and come up fatally short. He checked the pressure meter in the airlock and ascertained that the hangar deck was pressurized, then slipped into the hangar and ran for the shuttlecraft parked on the launch pad.

Fortunately the shuttlecraft didn't seem to have been damaged in any of the planet killer's attacks. More fortunately, there seemed to be no one present in hangar control - whoever had been manning that station must have been critically injured and rushed to sick bay. Still, no time to lose - the security alert lights were already flashing. Decker clambered into the shuttlecraft and started the engines, punching up the remote controls for the hangar deck. Now would be the tricky part - opening the doors without depressurizing the bay. Hopefully this shuttlecraft and the others were weighed down enough not to be sucked straight out of the bay like soap bubbles.

As it turned out, no such fate awaited any of the shuttlecraft: though the one Decker had commandeered was jolted off the landing pad by the gust of evacuating air as the doors opened. So much, the better. Decker punched the maneuvering thrusters and powered on out of the hangar, just as the process reversed and the doors began to close.

Once clear of the hangar, Decker allowed himself a minute of relaxation. As he'd hoped, the crew of the *Enterprise* was so preoccupied with outrunning the berserker that they'd not noted his departure until it was too late. There was no chance of flying to his fate completely unnoticed, and thus he tensed again, concentrating on outraging the *Enterprise's* tractor beams.

He peered into the sensor viewer on his left. Already the *Enterprise* was scores of kilometers behind him and still there were no indications that his departure had been noted, beyond the hangar doors closing. He'd had command of that ship after all. Maybe for only a couple of hours, but it was a fine ship, a far cry from the *Constellation*.

Decker refocused the sensors on his own poor, half-destroyed ship. This was the first he'd seen of it from outside since its first engagement with the berserker. Were his spirit not already broken, seeing its pathetic, shredded appearance would have finished it for sure. The dying *Constellation* was now on a rendezvous course with the *Enterprise* as it struggled to cling to life like a dying man trying to finish one final task. He was just such a man, he mused - Dr. Jol had told him that his own psychological condition was directly proportional to the condition of the ship: and now, indubitably, the *Constellation* was as unsalvageable a wreck as he was. In hindsight, the *Enterprise* might well have ended up the same way if not for Kirk's intervention. As far as he was concerned, losing two commands in as many days on top of his other losses - all four hundred of them - his life was forfeit.

He trained the sensor viewer on the planet killer, still dead astern of the *Enterprise*, still gaining. It was undeniable, insufferable, ghastly in its size and appearance, gulping down rubble by the mega-ton. Decker shook his head, still swept with incomprehension that the accursed thing could so coldly devour whole solar systems for the sake of a war that it had singlehandedly ended eons ago. This must be its last meal, even if it meant putting himself on the menu.

"*Enterprise* to shuttlecraft! Come in, shuttlecraft!" There it was - Palmer's voice cutting into his ruminations. "Come in, shuttlecraft!"

He was too far out to be reeled back in. He slowly reached forward and pressed the switch beside the speaker. "Shuttlecraft to *Enterprise*," he answered in a voice bereft of tone. "Decker here."

"Commodore," Spock exhorted, "I must insist that you return to the ship."

"You said it yourself, Spock. There is no way to blast through the hull of that machine, so....I'm going to take this thing right down its throat." Decker pressed another switch, his pulse quickening as the viewing ports slid open and the monster came into plain view beyond: the last thing those hundreds of men and women under his command had ever seen, fittingly the last thing he would ever see, no worse a sight than he deserved.

"This is Kirk." The voice on the speaker was piercing and urgent. "Matt, you'll be killed."

"I've been prepared for death ever since I...ever since I killed my crew," Decker said in a long sigh.

"No one expects you to die for an error in judgment!"

"A commander is responsible for the lives of his crew," Decker replied, the resignation to his fate underscoring his sentiments. "And for their deaths. Well, I should have died with mine."

"You cannot succeed, Commodore," Spock interjected. "Your only logical alternative is to return to the ship."

He might as well have tried to warn off a Klingon battle cruiser. Decker had already asked for logical alternatives once. He'd heard them all, from Zhour, from T'Prea, from Marlowe. The last had seemed the most promising, and how had that gone? Kirk was dead wrong - his error in judgment had cost hundreds of lives, and death was the only possible penance.

"Matt," Kirk persisted. "Matt, listen to me! You can't throw your life away like this!"

Decker didn't reply. As he stared fixedly down the throat of his Bane, those hysterical screams for help echoed in his mind's ear again, the earthrending crashes of the machine's antimatter beam tearing the planet to shreds. Kirk hadn't been there to witness the horror of seeing up close the results of his last fatal mistake.

"Matt, you're a starship commander!" Kirk's protests became louder and more desperate with every kilometer of closure. "That makes you a valuable commodity! We need you, your experience, your judgment. *Matt!*"

Decker switched the intercom off. He would never know that Kirk was still pleading with him, that Kirk, Spock, and the entire crew of the *Enterprise* were staring in rapt disbelief at his final act of sacrifice.

As he drew inexorably closer to the planet killer's evilly glowing maw, as it continued to gulp down rubble by the mega-ton, his tortured mind perceived the features of a face in every rock it devoured. Edgerton. Seppala. Samuels. Dorian. Masada. Zhour. Galbraith....four hundred rocks, four hundred faces, all swallowed whole by Decker's Bane.

Maria....

In his emotional breakdown aboard the *Constellation*, he'd only been able to imagine how much terror his crew had had to endure at the end. He no longer imagined it as the great ghastly maw filled the entire viewport and the shuttlecraft passed beyond the point of no return. All he could see, all he could think, was the same shocked hysteria he'd felt as he watched that monstrous abomination pulverize the third planet and his crew along with it. He remembered his desperation, felt their dread, remembered his impotence, felt their despair, and the terror mushroomed in him as he now faced the same fate they had.

Masked with abhorrence, he pushed himself back in his chair, clapped his hand over his face as the energy field blinded him. But it was far too late: the infernal monster had him. He felt what the rest of them must have felt, saw the visions of his crew reproachfully awaiting him from the other side, beheld the dreadful end that lay only seconds before him.

He had crossed the bridge and he had broken it with his own hands.

At that moment Gandalf lifted his staff, and crying aloud he smote the bridge before him. The staff broke asunder and fell from his hand. A blinding sheet of white flame sprang up. The bridge cracked. Right at the Balrog's feet it broke, and the stone upon which it stood crashed into the gulf, while the rest remained, poised, quivering like a tongue of rock thrust out into emptiness.

With a terrible cry the Balrog fell forward, and its shadow plunged down and vanished. But even as it fell it swung its whip, and the thongs lashed and curled about the wizard's knees, dragging him to the brink. He staggered, and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid into the abyss. 'Fly, you fools!' he cried, and was gone.

Chapter 17

"Personal log, Commodore Matthew Decker, Stardate Four-two-oh-two point nine. Final entry. There is only one course left for me to take. One last shot at stopping that planet-eating monstrosity. There's a lot about this incident that reminds me of the engagement over Dimidium. In fact, when I met a Dimidian face to face, he told me they believed in sacrifice, laying down that which they loved and cherished in order to protect their world. This after a single Starfleet officer made the ultimate sacrifice to stop them from destroying a neighboring planet. I can't even remember that man's name now. All I remember is that he's another man who would have survived if not for orders from me. But he died saving the lives of his surviving shipmates because he couldn't live with the judgment he would face for what he believed was cowardice.

"That's where I'm at now. I've destroyed more than four hundred people who lived and died by my command, left their families with a gap in their worlds and their lives that can never again be filled. I know the void they'll be feeling. When my wife was dying, her final wish was to be laid to rest and become part of the earth. I swore on her grave that I would never let another planet be devastated as long as I lived. In trying to fulfill that oath, I got my ship wrecked; and I tried to save the lives of my crew by drawing that weapon away from them, but again I failed, and I got them all killed instead. I will never be able to live with that failure, therefore I cannot go on living. A man can only suffer so many failures before enough is enough.

"Jim Kirk, when you listen to this recording, I want you to know that my choice of death will give you a fighting chance for life. What I'm about to do will leave you in command of this situation. Don't risk yourself or your ship over a sentimental memory. I have one last thing to ask of you - keep an eye on Will for me. Set him a good example, and be honest with him about my decision. I can't imagine either he or my daughter Brandi will be impressed by my conduct over the past couple of days, but nonetheless I must strike one last blow to protect them, the Rigel sector, and all our hopes for galactic peace. End of log."

Kirk turned off the log recorder and stared ruefully at it with a sigh. He looked up at Spock and McCoy, standing beside the work desk in his quarters: the former had found the recorder in the turbolift Decker had taken to the lower levels. Four hours were past since the longest thirty seconds of their lives to date, during which Kirk had almost been obliterated with the *Constellation* as he blew its impulse reactor inside the planet killer to stop the thing dead in its tracks.

"Kenneth Odell," Kirk said simply.

"Who?" McCoy frowned.

"That's the man whose name Matt couldn't remember. He was left in command of the *Leonis* during the Dimidium crisis after his captain was killed. But he didn't have the chops for command. I'll never forget what he told me before he flew his ship into the missile's path - he could never face the judgment of anyone who survived that day. And yet...billions of people did, who wouldn't have if it wasn't for him."

"If memory serves," Spock said, "Lieutenant Odell was posthumously cited for valor for the action he took to destroy the Dimidian weapon. However, I find it rather illogical that Commodore Decker also chose the way of self-sacrifice. Surely he must have realized that he lacked the power to inflict severe damage on the machine."

McCoy rolled his eyes. "You know, Spock, it's about time someone told you," he growled. "Humans don't do things for logical reasons. Sometimes they do things for reasons even they don't understand at the time, even when they're the picture of mental health. I could've stopped Decker dead in his tracks if you hadn't invoked -"

"Another time, gentlemen," Kirk interrupted. "Matt did what he felt was necessary, to the same end as Odell and for the same reasons. If we're going to be logical about it, we should render the same departing honors. We'll hold a memorial service in the ship's chapel this evening."

"What's to memorialize?" McCoy said. "You weren't on board when he took over the ship, Jim. The man had a screw loose, and I never even had a chance to make a record of it, what with all the casualties he was sending me."

"He may have almost gotten my ship destroyed, but I don't want him to be remembered for a mental nervous breakdown," Kirk said firmly. "None of us would have had a chance if he hadn't done what he did. Spock's not wrong, Odell did receive the commendation of history for sacrificing himself. But at most, there are only three living people, myself included, who know what was really in his mind."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock said. "But history only shows what its recorders have chosen to reveal."

"Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?" McCoy looked at Kirk askance.

"Kenneth Odell believed himself to be a coward," Kirk said softly. "Matt Decker believed himself to be a failure. But when you examine both outcomes, Bones...it's clear that neither man deserves to be remembered that way."

11 November 2267

Ms. Brandi L. Decker

7470 Lakewood-Menominee, Province of Wisconsin

North America, Earth

Dear Ms. Decker:

Starfleet Command deeply regrets to inform you that your father, Commodore Matthew R. Decker, died in the line of duty on Stardate 4202.9 (Earth date 20 October 2267).

The captain's log of the U.S.S. *Enterprise*, also involved in the incident, discloses that while Commodore Decker was in command of U.S.S. *Constellation*, he intercepted an automated alien weapon of unknown extragalactic origin. The weapon, which was engaged in

indiscriminately destroying entire planets and consuming their remains, disabled the Constellation and rendered Commodore Decker the sole surviving crew member. According to the Enterprise log, he thereupon initiated an attempt to destroy the weapon by piloting his ship into its interior and overloading the impulse engines, causing a massive fusion explosion that permanently deactivated the weapon.

Unfortunately, the Enterprise's transporter had been damaged during the engagement and could not be repaired while the Constellation's engines still possessed sufficient explosive force. As a result, the Enterprise was unable to transport Commodore Decker to safety before his ship was destroyed.

Your father bravely sacrificed his own life to protect the many billions of inhabitants of the Rigel sector and uncountable solar systems beyond. He will be remembered with according reverence in the historical records of Starfleet and the Federation. Enclosed please find a posthumous citation for the Federation Legion of Honor, in recognition of his courage and extraordinary heroism. A representative of Starfleet Command will be calling at your home in the coming weeks to present the award to you in person.

Again, please accept our condolences on your father's loss and our sincere gratitude for his honorable service to the Federation.

Very truly yours,

Fleet Adm. Robert T. April, SFC-UFP

Commander-in-Chief, Starfleet

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!